

# *To Cherish and Conserve*

*The early years of the  
Archaeological Survey of India*

*John Kean*

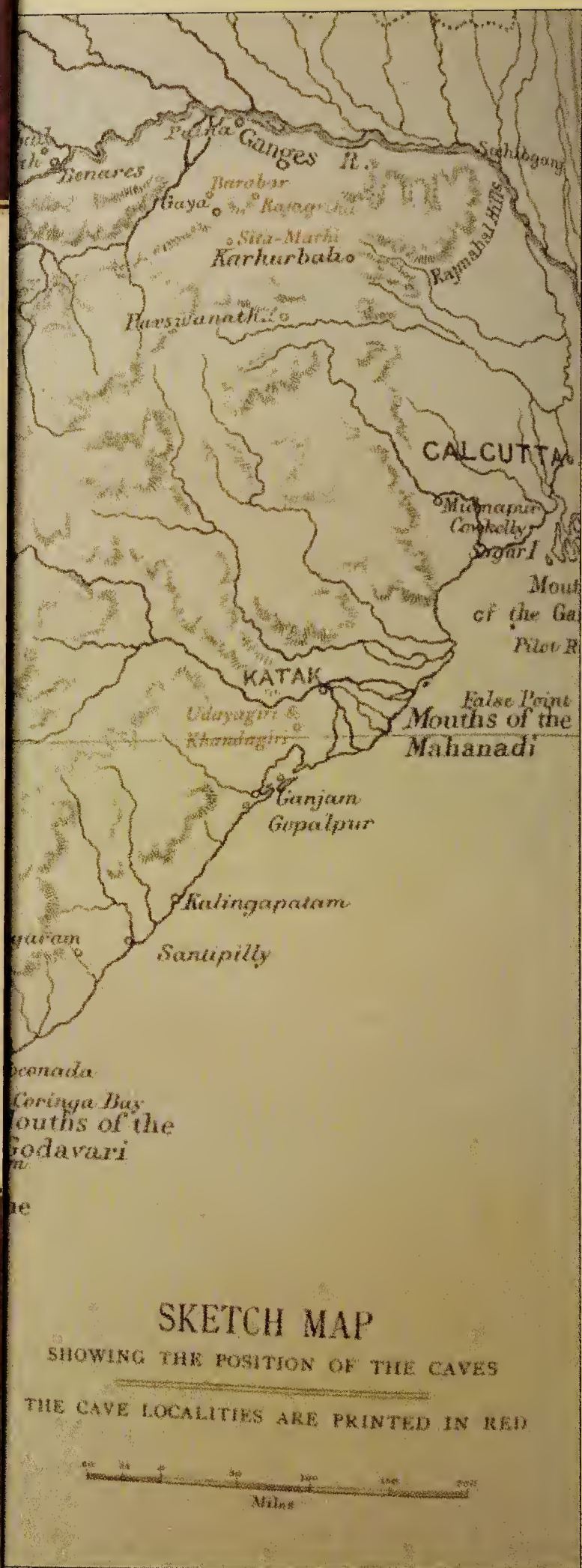


प्रत्नकीर्तिमपावृणु

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA

Celebrating 150 years is a fitting occasion to pay tribute to those who laid the foundation of the Archaeological Survey of India. This book records the immense effort of early archaeologists, explorers, and administrators who contributed to the discovery and documentation of India's vast and varied archaeological heritage.

John Keay, an eminent author of several books on India and Asia, has collated poignant information from Indian and British archives to weave an interesting narrative of the beginnings of ASI.



This book was released on  
 20th December, 2011  
 by the Hon'ble Prime Minister,  
 Shri Manmohan Singh to  
 commemorate 150 years of ASI.



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Diacritical marks have not been used in this work in place names and Sanskrit terms. Place names have been spelt according to spellings used in British records.

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Cover Page: Segment of Asokan Edict from Sarnath

Frontispiece image:

Sarnath, where the Buddha delivered his first sermon, yielded this classic Gupta-era sculpture of the preaching Buddha.



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*Cherish and Conserve*

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National Culture Fund







# Acknowledgements

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The text has been read by Professor Nayanjot Lahiri in Delhi and Rudrangshu Mukherjee in Calcutta. I am greatly indebted to them for a number of comments, both kind and enlightening. For any errors, of course, I alone am responsible.

The National Culture Fund team in Delhi, T. Lakshmi Priya, Joyoti Roy and Sonali Dhingra have been a pleasure to deal with. They and especially the Chief Executive Officer, Dr Shobita Punja, have handled the project more expeditiously and professionally than any commercial publisher.

The idea behind this book is to record how Archaeological Survey of India began and to encourage young people to rediscover, cherish and conserve India's incredible past.

John Keay





The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has over the last 150 years played a vital role in the re-discovery and conservation of India's rich architectural and archaeological heritage.

Today, ASI protects over 3667 monuments of national importance that reflect the true nature of India's cultural diversity and secular democracy. The buildings and sites under the aegis of ASI range from the pre-historic cave paintings of Bhimbetka to the astronomical marvels of the observatories of Jantar Mantar in Delhi and Jaipur. These monuments and sites under ASI's protection tell the story of the evolution of Indian architecture, sculpture and painting traditions in different regions of the country. Iconic buildings, like the Taj Mahal in Agra, the sacred Buddhist stupas of Sanchi and Bodh Gaya, Churches of Goa, and the grand edifices of the Mughal period form part of the shared heritage of the Indian subcontinent. Eighteen well-known examples of India's built heritage have been bestowed with the World Heritage Site status by the UNESCO and are recognized as having outstanding universal value by the global community.

The ASI maintains 41 site museums that showcase significant finds, relics, sculpture, epigraphic records from archaeological excavations such as those of Dholavira in Gujarat, Nagarjunakonda in Andhra Pradesh and Sarnath in Uttar Pradesh.

Established in 1861, ASI was primarily involved in surveying and listing of monuments. At the turn of the twentieth century, its role expanded to include preservation and conservation within its purview. In the last 150 years, the organization has undertaken pioneering research in the field of preservation, conservation, architectural studies, epigraphy and underwater archaeology among others.

The 150 years celebration of ASI is a fitting occasion to pay tribute to those who laid the foundation of this organization, to the immense efforts of archaeologists who have labored in the field and added to the knowledge and understanding of India's rich historic past. This book acknowledges the innumerable contributions made by unnamed surveyors, explorers, epigraphists, draftsmen and excavators who contributed to the discovery and documentation of India's vast and varied archaeological heritage.

ASI is grateful to John Keay for preparing the contents of this valuable publication that narrates the story of the early years of the organization. We are also thankful to the National Culture Fund for initiating the idea of commemorating 150th anniversary of ASI with a book by this renowned author. Lastly, recognition must be given to the continuous support from the Ministry of Culture towards ASI's principal endeavour to protect India's invaluable heritage.

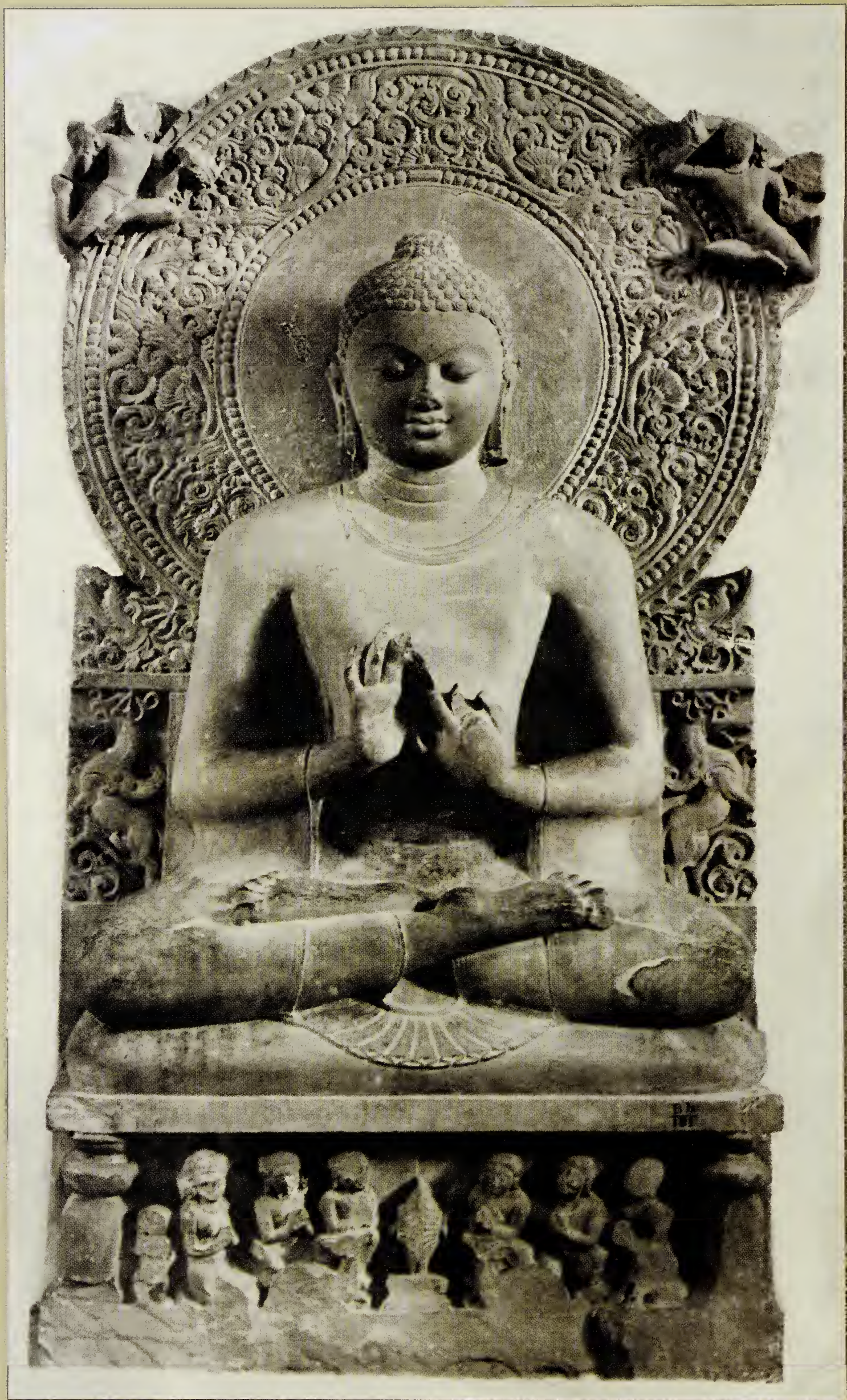


Dr Gautam Sengupta  
DG ASI  
20 December, 2011











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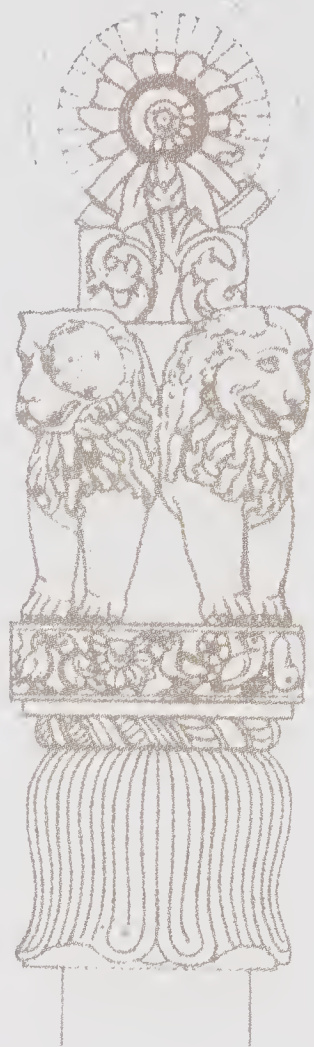
The Lion Capital of an Asoka pillar, now the national emblem of the Republic of India, holds pride of place in the ASI's museum at Sarnath, Varanasi.



## The Archaeology of the Survey

In a booklet published in 1961 to mark the centenary of the Archaeological Survey of India, Sourindranath Roy made a bold claim. ‘To put it briefly,’ he declared, ‘it is archaeology which, more than anything else, has helped [India] to rediscover herself, to win back, so to say, her lost identity.’ Writing within a decade and a half of Independence when nation-building was still the priority, Roy might have added that the new India had in fact deliberately privileged archaeology. The four-fronted lion capital from a column excavated at Sarnath (near Varanasi) and originally erected by the emperor Asoka in the third century BC had already been adopted as the nation’s emblem. It appeared – and still does – on banknotes, postage stamps, passports and government letterheads; and from the same sculpted capital a *chakra* (the spoked wheel of *dharma*) forms the centrepiece of the national flag. Rather than an image of the endangered tiger, say, or the Taj Mahal, an archaeological find of almost unfathomable antiquity had been chosen to symbolise the awakening nation.





Yet it would be wrong to think that the twentieth-century prominence accorded to archaeology was something new; a long and distinguished record of antiquarian enquiry preceded it. In fact it was courtesy of the discoveries of amateur archaeologists in the nineteenth century that India had triumphantly overcome the handicap of a patchily documented history and so, according to Roy, re-established 'her lost links with a great past'. Unusually, the recorded history of pre-modern India is seldom to be read on parchment or paper. Rather it must be pieced together from the chance testimony of long-buried coins and copper plates or from etchings in slabs of weather-worn stone. In effect, the national archives lie embedded in the very bones of the country. Inscribed rocks and metals tell of India's ancient empires; architectural context helps to date these empires, and frescoes and sculptural reliefs serve to populate them. Thanks to the centuries-long exploration and study of monuments, buildings, artefacts and excavations, India's conception of what she once was – and what she might again become – has undergone, in Sourindranath Roy's words, 'nothing short of a revolution'.

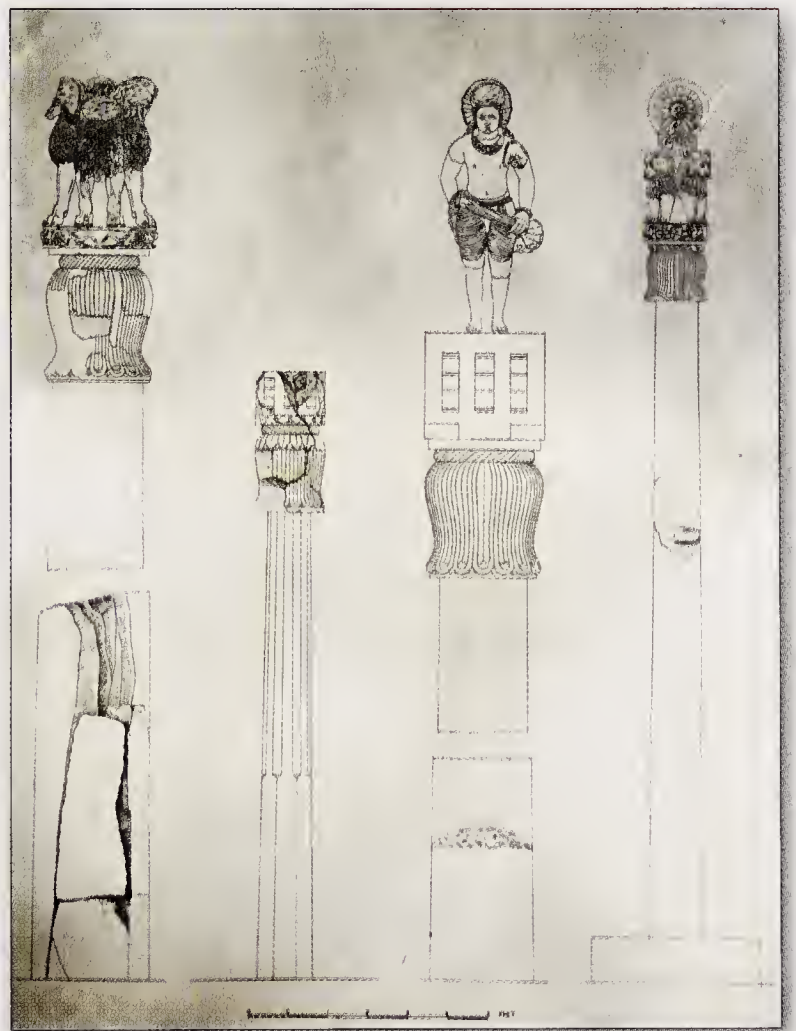
*Archaeology is thus no outward frill [in India], no ornamental embroidery on modern Indian history. It is something deeply rooted in the country's very existence, and constitutes almost a moral and spiritual necessity.*<sup>1</sup>

More surprisingly, some of India's foreign invaders and imperialists have shared in this

enthusiasm for interrogating its archaeology. Of the several polished pillars erected by the emperor Asoka – some still with sculpted capitals like the Sarnath lion – the first ones to attract scholarly attention went on display in Delhi as early as the fourteenth century. Ten to twenty metres tall and weighing several hundred tons, the gigantic stone monoliths – there were two of them – had been found at separate sites to the north of Delhi. Toppled onto carefully prepared beds of cotton-wool and encased in a protective packaging of reeds and sheepskins, they had then been trundled across the Punjab on a 42-wheeler flatbed drawn by 8,400 men and finally shipped down the Yamuna (Jumna) river on a flotilla of closely lashed grain barges.

Ten to twenty metres tall and weighing several hundred tons, the gigantic stone monoliths had been found at separate sites to the north of Delhi.

This was all at the behest of Firoz Shah, the sultan of Delhi at the time, who had determined to re-erect the pillars in prominent proximity to his citadel; indeed one still stands amid the ruins of Firoz Shah's Kotla (fort) in the heart of what is now New Delhi. The sultan coveted the pillars as trophies and architectural adornments, but he was also intrigued by their antiquity and their purpose. Brahmins were therefore summoned to decipher the neatly written letters that ringed the pillars and that to this day remain so sharply incised in the

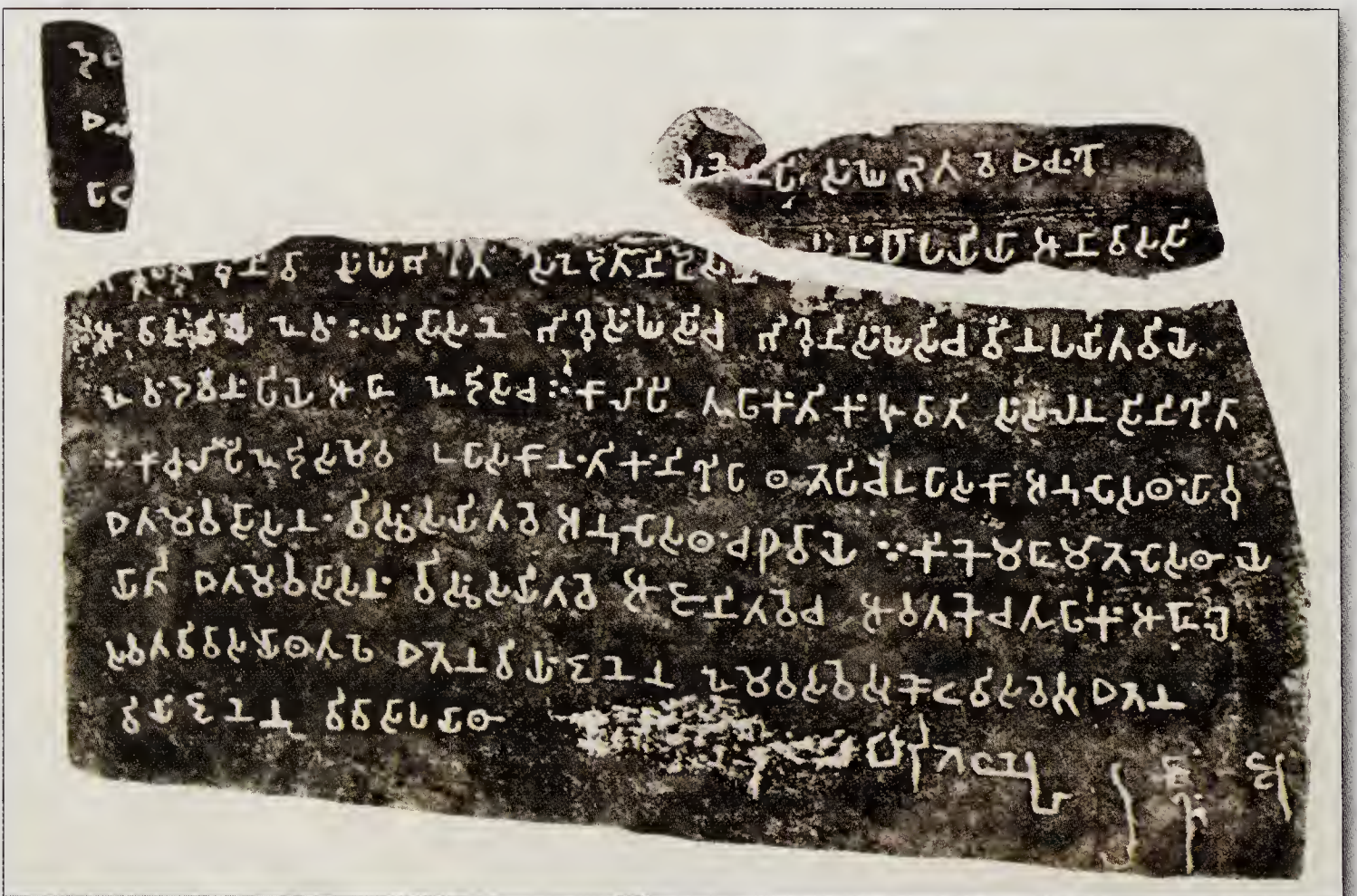




polished stone that they look quite recent. But the script, however perfect, bore no discernible relationship to any still in use in the fourteenth century. Sanskrit scholars could make no more sense of it than Muslim divines. Their suggested 'readings' were mere wishful fabrications and failed to convince the sultan.

Of the lofty sentiments and noble directives that were in fact contained in these mysterious runes, as of the emperor who had so indelibly promulgated them some fifteen centuries earlier, all remained unknown. Not until four hundred years later would another breed of inquisitive invaders scrutinise anew the neat 'pin-men' script of the pillars and, after some equally fanciful readings, finally succeed in identifying the language in question and deducing the value of each letter. In 'cracking' the mystery of what became known as the Asoka Brahmi script,

James Prinsep's  
deciphering of Asoka's  
Edicts (as on this fragment  
from Sarnath) launched  
the archaeological  
reconstruction of India's  
ancient history.





it was these nineteenth-century pioneers who launched the modern era in Indian archaeology, and it was their achievements that would determine the early focus of the great Archaeological Survey of India.

With so much to be learned from exhuming the past it was hardly surprising that India's antiquities, far from being universally neglected during the two centuries of British rule, have been credited with enjoying better protective legislation and a more organised antiquities service than existed in most countries in Europe. Both legislation and service had their shortcomings, especially in the early years, but in general 'India's record in protecting and preserving its monuments stands comparison with any country in the world,' according to Henry Cleere of the International Council on Monuments and Sites.<sup>2</sup> The one exception is France, whose example may well have been influential in the founding of India's Archaeological Survey, as will appear. Otherwise India was ahead of the field. Even in Britain an Ancient Monuments Protection Act was not passed, and a Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments not constituted, until the 1880s. This was two decades after the British government in India had extended far more effective statutory protection to India's monuments and had inaugurated an archaeological survey in part to oversee this protection. Though the Survey would certainly elevate Indian archaeology to





Major-General Sir Alexander Cunningham, the ASI's first Director General, spent fifty years exploring and recording north India's forgotten sites.



exceptional prominence, it was the ground-breaking achievements of British and Indian archaeologists prior to the government's involvement that validated the need for the Survey in the first place.

## Oriental Jones

In his preface to the first of the 23 volumes of reports published by the Archaeological Survey of India for the years 1862-84, Alexander Cunningham, the Survey's founder and first surveyor-general, would pay tribute, after a fashion, to his precursors in the field. These precursors did not include sultan Firoz Shah or the seventeenth-century chronicler Abul Fazl, whose description of Mughal India under the emperor Akbar contained references to both sites and structures of historical interest. Nor did Cunningham waste any words on the several European merchants and eccentrics who, travelling out to Mughal India in the seventeenth century, had often written in wide-eyed wonder of its buildings and monuments, including those stone pillars and their enigmatic inscriptions.

Instead Cunningham directed attention to a handful of more recent scholars. With one exception, none were South Asians. Although the foreign pioneers, Cunningham included, depended on the scholarly attainments, publications and linguistic skills (in Sanskrit, Pali, and other languages) of native informants, the identity of these helpers was little publicised; they were acknowledged merely as '*pundits*',



‘Brahmins’, ‘monks’ or ‘priests’. The credit for any discoveries lay, it was understood, with the foreign *sahibs*. Nearly all these foreigners were British-born like Cunningham himself; all displayed a reverence for ancient stonework and statuary, the legacy of an educational curriculum skewed in favour of classical Greece and Rome; and all took an interest in the origins of religious belief, a by-product of their Christian upbringing and exposure to Biblical studies.



The inscribed Asoka pillar Inside the fort at Allahabad (UP) has been re-erected at least twice. A section of another pillar was here found in use as a road-roller.

This shared background would be no guarantee of favourable treatment from the formidable Cunningham. But one of his precursors, Sir William Jones, ‘the father of Indological studies’ and a man for whom the term ‘genius’ might have been specially coined, was above criticism. Revered as a scholar by Edward Gibbon (author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*) and by Dr Samuel Johnson (who himself urged greater attention to India’s antiquities), Jones had served as Calcutta’s High Court judge from 1783-94.

During that time he neither ventured beyond Bengal nor indulged in any archaeological fieldwork. But in 1784, Jones founded the Asiatic Society (later called the Asiatic Society of Bengal) which, under his inspirational leadership, became the great clearing-house



for information and observations on ‘the History, Civil and Natural, the Antiquities, Arts, Sciences and Literature of Asia’. As the institutional forerunner of the Archaeological Survey of India, the claims of the Asiatick Society in Calcutta would be hard to beat.

Egged on by Jones, officials and travellers throughout the subcontinent responded by bombarding the new Society with reports on everything from coconuts to coal mines. Oddities and antiquities featured prominently, and none more so than further stone pillars closely resembling those collected by sultan Firoz Shah. Their undeciphered inscriptions – and others from old coins, sculpted stonework, rock-cut statuary and rocky outcrops – were rendered as facsimiles for inclusion in the Society’s journal either by careful copying or by inking in the lettering and taking an impression from it. Commonalities were noted and curiosity mounted.

William Jones himself failed to decipher the script on the pillars; they ‘drive me to despair,’ he wrote. But with the help of ‘Ramlochand Cantaberna’ (who, though not a Brahmin, had acquired a knowledge of the language as a physician) and ‘Radhakanta Sharman’ (a *pandit* retained by Governor-General Warren Hastings), Jones did master Sanskrit. He read voraciously in this still jealously guarded language and was soon rewarded with a series of remarkable discoveries. While his translations introduced the glories of Sanskrit literature to a non-Brahmin audience for the first time, he





took particular delight in the language itself. He called it 'the Latin of India'. It was truly a classical language; indeed it had so many similarities to both Latin and Greek in terms of grammar and even vocabulary that it must share a common origin with them. In a flash of inspiration Jones thus not only discovered what became known as the Indo-European family of languages but launched the science of philology whereby language is studied as a key to the past, its developing forms being as revealing as archaeological strata.

Nor was this the only breakthrough. Almost incidentally Jones's Sanskrit reading, when aided by reports reaching the Asiatic Society and some inspired guesswork, led him to announce the first approximate date in early Indian history. Alexander the Great's invasion of the Punjab in 326 BC had gone unnoticed by Sanskrit literature. It was thus no help in

The highly polished stone of the Asoka pillars came from quarries at Chunar Garh on the Ganga. From here the monoliths were moved by boat.





synchronising dates based on the Gregorian calendar of the West with the several eras in use in India. But Jones managed to identify a ruler known to Greek sources as ‘Sandrocottos’ with an Indian emperor named as Chandragupta in the Sanskrit king-lists. By synchronism with Greek history an approximate date – about 300BC – could thus be awarded to Chandragupta and, by extrapolation from the regnal years given for his antecedents and successors in the king-lists, whole Indian dynasties and eras could at last be chronologically located.



These were all major discoveries. In the space of a decade, Jones had opened the eyes of his contemporaries to the wonders of Indian civilisation and had made the study of India’s antiquity academically respectable. Even Cunningham admitted that the Chandragupta breakthrough established what ‘for many years would be the sole firm ground in the quicksands of Indian history’.<sup>3</sup> Chairs in Sanskrit were established in Europe’s leading universities. The East India Company encouraged the learning of Indian languages and sponsored their first vernacular printings. Meanwhile a whole generation of Company servants and soldiers became amateur antiquarians.

## The Pioneers

Of Horace Hayman Wilson, who as Jones’s recognised successor took on the presidency of the Asiatick Society before retiring to Oxford as professor of Sanskrit, Cunningham had little good to say. Wilson knew his Sanskrit but ‘his



archaeological writings added little, if anything, to his reputation'.<sup>4</sup> Even his dates were often wrong – and Cunningham was never happier than when correcting them, at length. But for those who tramped the Indian countryside and, in the course of their duties, somehow found time to record, collect and report on their archaeological findings, Cunningham had a high regard born of fellow feeling. Such was Colin Mackenzie, whose collection of manuscripts and inscriptions (1568 manuscripts, 8000 inscriptions, 6000 coins etc) represented 'far and away the largest and most important hoard of historical materials amassed in India during the nineteenth century.'<sup>5</sup> No linguist himself, in fact a mathematician by inclination and a military surveyor by profession, Mackenzie relied heavily on the services of the Brahmin 'Kavali Venkata Boriah' and two Jain monks, about whose community he became something of an authority.

After a cartographical survey in peninsular India in the wake of the British defeat of Tipu Sultan of Mysore in 1799, Mackenzie had resumed his antiquarian investigations as Surveyor-General (of map-making rather than archaeology) in Bengal and Bihar. Others followed him. In the south Mackenzie's movements were matched, and in the north preceded, by a fellow Scot, Francis Buchanan (later 'Buchanan-Hamilton'). A doctor and botanist, Buchanan conducted statistical and agricultural surveys that were easily eclipsed by his interest in the past. Cunningham would credit him with being one of the



first to demonstrate the value of detailed archaeological site plans and measurements; their ‘meritorious minuteness and strict correctness’ Cunningham would vouch for personally when his own wanderings took him to many of the same sites.

In late 1811, while botanising in Bihar, Dr Buchanan came upon a lofty pyramidal tower festooned in foliage and set amid a chaos of crumbling brickwork and broken statuary. He was not the first to visit the site. His informants had a name for the place - Boddh Gaya - and the company of Hindu renunciates who inhabited it seemed quite accustomed to visitors. When they told of earlier enquirers from the kingdom of Ava in Burma, Buchanan’s suspicions were confirmed. He had himself accompanied a British expedition to Burma, as also one to Nepal, and in both places he had noticed the popularity and peculiarities of the

Controversially restored by both devotees and conservationists, the temple at Boddh Gaya (Bihar) stands where the Buddha achieved Enlightenment.





religious practice known as Buddhism. None of the mainly Muslim chronicles for the previous 800 years mentioned the presence of Buddhists in India itself, but Buddhism was still thriving in the lands that lay around India – in Sri Lanka as well as Nepal, Tibet, China, Burma and Thailand. Some distant Buddhist connection to India thus seemed probable, if strangely elusive.

With that ‘meritorious minuteness’ noted by Cunningham, Buchanan clambered among the rubble at Boddh Gaya to scrutinise the statuary and was soon convinced that, despite the site’s appropriation by a Hindu *mahant*, it had once been sacred to the followers of the Buddha, indeed ‘the centre of [that] religion in India’. He recognised statues of the Buddha that were being mistakenly worshipped as those of Hindu deities and, extending his researches to other sites in the vicinity, he identified a host of inscriptions and architectural features



as peculiarly Buddhist. That Buddhism had actually originated in India, and that the Buddha had lived there, attained enlightenment there and achieved *nirvana* there, Buchanan barely realised. But that a whole new dimension had been added to Indian antiquity was obvious.

Boddh Gaya, Bihar.

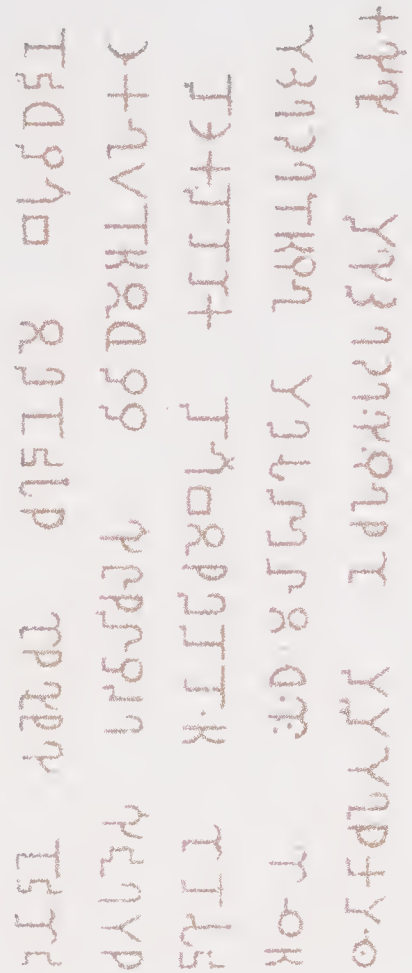
Cunningham, who would be accused of directing his own archaeological researches almost exclusively to Buddhist sites, conceded his great debt to Buchanan. But the publication of



Buchanan’s report was inexplicably delayed for some twenty years. By then Cunningham himself, aged nineteen, had arrived in India and found a patron to whom he would be far more indebted, both personally and professionally. This was James Prinsep, a shy and excitable scientist who in 1833 became Assay-Master of the Calcutta mint and secretary of the now renamed Asiatic Society of Bengal. From the minting of the East India Company’s silver rupees, Prinsep had been drawn into the study of those older coinages forwarded to the Asiatic Society by collectors in the field; and from evaluating the metal content of such finds he had taken up the study of their inscribed legends. These in turn threw light on the kings and dynasties that had minted them. The Assay Master had thus become an outstanding numismatist, an avid historian and, since the legends were in a variety of scripts, a dogged epigraphist. The Asiatic Society finally had at its helm a man whose scientific methods, prodigious memory and code-breaking aptitude boded well for the deciphering of unknown scripts. Those ‘pin–men’ letters so neatly engraved on the polished stone pillars, and now recognised on certain coins and rock-cut inscriptions, were about to yield their secret.

### Prinsep’s Moment

‘The eureka moment’ came in 1837, otherwise ‘the *annus mirabilis* of Indian historiography and philology’.<sup>6</sup> That year, within the space of a few months, copies of three inscriptions in the pin-men script of the pillars reached Prinsep in Calcutta. Two had been found on

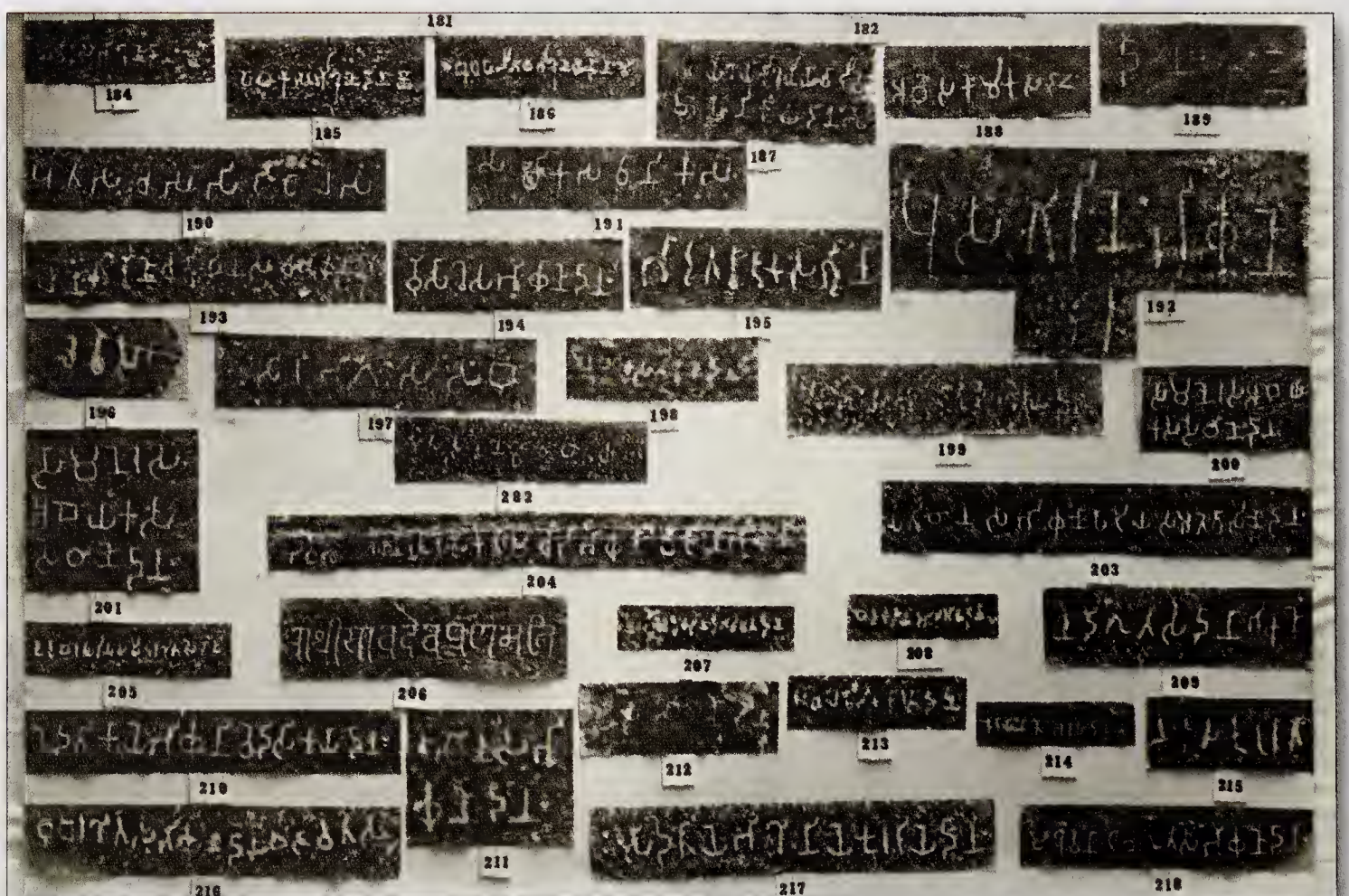




prominent outcrops of rock, and although on examination their content would seem to have much in common, they came from opposite ends of the country (Orissa and Gujerat). Clearly, whatever their import, it was meant to have the widest imaginable currency; either that, or whoever was responsible for them must have exercised the widest imaginable sway. As if the pillar inscriptions were not intriguing enough, this evidence of the script's India-wide distribution was positively tantalising.

The third inscription to reach Prinsep in 1837 looked less exciting. It was actually a set of quite short impressions, all taken from the stonework of a 'tope' located north of Bhopal in central India. By now the domed mound, or circular tower, known as a 'tope' (or 'dagoba', 'pagoda', and, more correctly, as a stupa or chorten) was recognised as the most distinctive monument attributable exclusively

Impressions like these from the ground rails of the stone palisade round the Great Stupa at Sanchi (MP) provided Prinsep with his breakthrough.





to Buddhism. Mackenzie had reported on one at Amaravati in Andhra Pradesh whose sculpted reliefs are still the pride of the British and Madras Museums; and Buchanan, familiar with the chortens of Nepal and the pagodas of Burma, had recognised the same form at Bodhi Gaya and elsewhere in Bihar. Since then, several other stupas of vast size had actually been excavated: one at Manikyala in the Punjab had yielded a hoard of coins and precious metals as well as votive offerings and relics; one at Sarnath had tempted the young Alexander Cunningham into tunneling into it, though to little effect, in 1835; and it was from the magnificently carved stone portals and railings of one at Sanchi north of Bhopal that the short inscriptions that now reached Prinsep had been taken.

The Sanchi inscriptions received Prinsep's attention first. Coins minted by Alexander

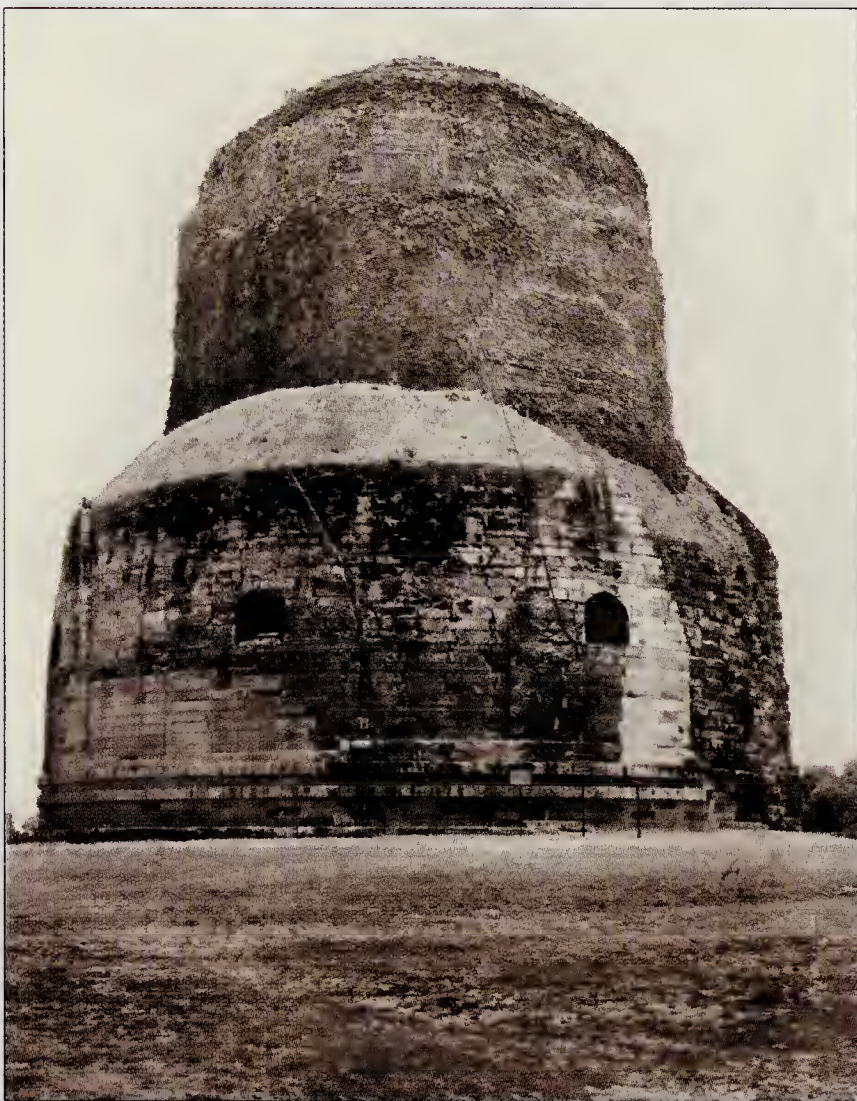
The sculpted gateways at Sanchi excited art lovers and Buddhist scholars quite as much as their inscriptions did historians and epigraphists.





the Great's successors in parts of what are now Afghanistan and Pakistan had been found to bear legends written in both Greek characters and in those pin-men characters of the pillars. Assuming the meaning of the legends to be identical, Prinsep had already worked out how vowels were indicated in the undeciphered script; and he had also deduced the equivalents of a few of the script's thirty-odd consonants. The Sanchi inscriptions yielded a few more. Noting that each of the new inscriptions ended with the same formula yet came from a different chunk of dressed stone, Prinsep guessed that, as with later inscriptions, each recorded the name of the donor who had originally had the stone cut. In every case, therefore, the donor's name would likely be followed by the equivalent of "...s gift"; and given that the Sanskrit word for 'gift'

Cunningham's archaeological explorations began in 1834 with his driving a shaft down through the lofty Dhamekh Stupa at Sarnath.



was *danam*, the last three characters would likely be 'd', 'n' and 'm', preceded by the genitive suffix 'sya'.

These were among the most frequently recurring of the pin-men characters and they were all new to Prinsep. They effectively tipped the balance in his favour. 'I can read the Delhi [pillar's] No 1 [script],' he announced in May 1837, 'the Bhilsa [ie Sanchi] inscriptions have enlightened me.' It remained only to summon



*pandit* Ratna Pala, Prinsep himself not being much of a linguist. With Ratna Pala's help Prinsep was in little doubt that, within days, he would be able to read 'the whole of these manifestoes of the right faith'.<sup>7</sup>

Though correct about how long it would take him to read the pillar inscriptions, Prinsep was wrong about their subject matter. They were not a Buddhist 'Ten Commandments' – or what he called 'Buddha's bulls' – but the bulls, or edicts, of someone else, a king who called himself either *Devanampiya* or *Piyadasi*, both meaning 'Beloved of the Gods'. Yet the Sanskrit king-lists mentioned no such person.

Prinsep now turned from the pillar inscriptions to those longer rock-cut inscriptions from Gujerat and Orissa. He announced his first discoveries from them in late 1837 and more in early 1838. But, finding the impression of the Gujerat text far from perfect, he then besought the Governor-General to despatch some trustworthy individual from Bombay to take a second impression of it. This request was granted. As the first instance of the government responding favourably to a plea to support archaeological enquiry it established a precedent that Cunningham would find encouraging.

## Enter Asoka

Pending the arrival of the new Gujerat impression, Prinsep continued to wrestle with the one he had. To his surprise, this mentioned





some of King Piyadasi's contemporaries in western Asia, including an Egyptian Ptolemy and a Macedonian Antigonos. It claimed that they too subscribed to Piyadasi's edicts and whether or not this was wishful thinking, the claim provided another chronological 'fix'. The dates of these rulers were known from Classical sources and they coincided only briefly; Piyadasi, whose inscription indicated the how long he had already been on the throne, must therefore have reigned from about 268 BC. Moreover Prinsep now had confirmation of what he had long come to suspect: according to a correspondent in Sri Lanka, that country's Buddhist traditions clearly identified Piyadasi as one of the epithets of an Indian ruler, by name Asoka, who was indeed mentioned in the Sanskrit king-lists.

Asoka's Edicts as carved on prominent rocks were soon reported right across India. This one is at Mansehra near Abbottabad in north-west Pakistan.

Of the Mauriya dynasty and a grandson of Chandragupta/Sandracottos, Asoka 'the





beloved of the Gods' had, according to the Sri Lankan texts, brought the entire subcontinent under his sway. Espousing Buddhism, he had also built stupas, endowed numerous pious foundations, made pilgrimages to them and delegated his son to undertake the conversion of Sri Lanka. The edicts on the pillars were his, as were those carved in Gujerat, Orissa and, as we now know, at a host of other rocky locations covering the length and breadth of the country. All the edicts, whether on pillars or rocks, extolled the practice of *dharma*, discouraged the taking of life and proclaimed the tolerant and beneficent sentiments of the great Asoka.

Suddenly India's pre-Islamic history had acquired its first recognisable personality, indeed a towering figure of pivotal importance whose moral stature would only grow with every new reading of his ubiquitous inscriptions. Moreover, thanks to the discovery of Asoka, India itself was revealed as more than just the geographical sum of its historically fragmented parts. Archaeology had restored its esteem as an ancient entity with a political pedigree comparable to China's. Moreover its humanitarian pedigree as advertised in Asoka's edicts would be the envy of the world. There could therefore be no more appropriate icon for a reintegrated and resurgent India in the twentieth century than an image derived from the four-fronted lion atop one of Asoka's pillars.



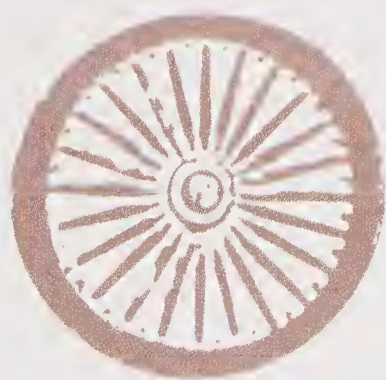
Sadly, it was not Prinsep and Ratna Pala who would be responsible for these crowning discoveries. Prinsep was still waiting for the new impression from Gujerat when the nausea and headaches induced by his squinting labours developed into a form of dementia. He was invalided home in November 1838 but never recovered. He died in 1840, aged 39.

*James Prinsep had done his work, for all his brilliant discoveries, which would have been the labour of ten or a dozen years for other men, were made during the last three years of his career... The powerful impetus given to Indian archaeology by James Prinsep was produced quite as much by the enthusiasm which he kindled in everyone who came in contact with him as by his translations of the old inscriptions of Asoka, which gave life to records that had been dead for more than 2000 years and that now form our chief landmarks in Indian history.<sup>8</sup>*

Cunningham further likened Prinsep's inspirational achievements to those of a 'great voyage of discovery under his sole command'. Now, with the commodore gone, the fleet broke up; exploration became 'limited to lesser expeditions in various directions ... led by many different persons'. Prominent among those operating in northern and western India, according to Cunningham, was James Fergusson, who became the great authority on Indian architecture but who, like Wilson, invariably got his dates wrong. Then there was Edward Thomas, who succeeded Prinsep as the great expert on Indian coins, and



Markham Kittoe, the ex-army officer who had provided Prinsep with the Orissan inscription and who was recognised as an indefatigable traveller. Kittoe, though, also had his shortcomings; 'I cannot recall a single locality which he identified,' wrote Cunningham, 'or a single historical doubt which he settled, or a single name of any dynasty which he established.'<sup>9</sup> Such specialised insights required the expertise of a genuine scholar; and luckily Prinsep's lieutenants included just such a person. To his list of Fergusson, Thomas and Kittoe, Cunningham added, quite rightly, 'and myself'.







‘With pistols cocked we ascended by the branch of a tree to the second tier of chambers...’ The caves at Ajanta (Maharashtra) were first brought to the world’s attention in 1820.



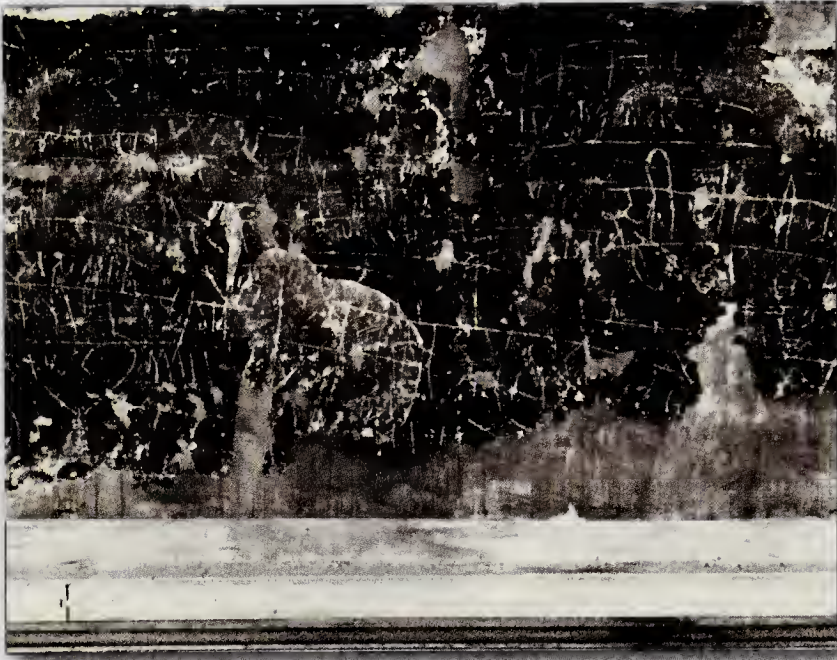
## *The First Surveyor-General*

The idea of persuading the East India Company to take India's antiquities seriously and, at the very least, to appoint someone to record them surfaced hard on the heels of Prinsep's revelations. As early as 1838 Cunningham himself addressed the Royal Asiatic Society in London about a possible survey and he again scouted the idea of an 'Archaeological Investigation' in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* in 1848. Meanwhile in 1844 London's Royal Asiatic Society had prevailed on the Company to the extent that the appointment of two or more 'Archaeological Enquirers' had actually been approved.

In what has been called 'the first deliberate attempt by the State to take an active interest in India's monuments', Lieutenant Robert Gill, an artist and marksman, was directed to the Ajanta caves above a jungly ravine in what is now Maharashtra.<sup>10</sup> There Gill was to protect, record and copy onto canvas what remained of the improbably sophisticated second-century BC to fifth-century AD frescoes that covered the interior surfaces of the caves. Discovered



some twenty years earlier, Ajanta's vividly coloured scenes of courtly life and devotion added a touch of glamour to what was becoming known of Buddhist India and had attracted worldwide interest. Gill began his work in 1844 and was then apparently forgotten. Happily sketching and shooting, he stayed put.



He would remain on site for an extraordinary 27 years, during which he produced a vast portfolio of paintings and drawings, undertook some ill-advised restoration work and 'is reputed to have reduced the local tiger population by at least a hundred and fifty kills'.<sup>11</sup>

More vulnerable than statuary or architecture, Ajanta's frescoes were easily defaced and would tax the conservation-minded ASI more than any other site.

The other 'Archaeological Enquirer' of the 1840s lasted less well, retiring from ill health after just a couple of seasons. This was Prinsep's protégé, Markham Kittoe of the Orissa inscription. Kittoe's remit was even more restricted than Gill's; he was to concentrate on an investigation of Bihar's Buddhist sites as noticed in two itineraries that had recently been published in French. The itineraries were those of Chinese monks who had visited the Buddhist 'holy land' of India in search of texts and relics during the fifth and seventh centuries AD. Not suprisingly their rendering, in an archaic Chinese, of Buddhism's tricky metaphysical concepts, of several hundred unfamiliar and since forgotten Indian place names and of a directory of debateable bearings and distances made for difficult reading; the



work of transliteration had seen off no less than three exhausted translators. Worse still, Kittoe spoke no French (let alone Chinese). He had to rely on an English digest of the French texts and, not to Cunningham's surprise, was soon hopelessly out of his depth. The idea was sound; these itineraries would soon unlock the whole geography of Buddhist India. It had just been entrusted to the wrong man. Even Kittoe himself admitted that textual scholarship was not his forte.

Cunningham, too, secured a copy of the Chinese itineraries and, while jealously fretting over the appointment of Kittoe, had managed with their help to locate the important Buddhist site of Sankissa near Kanauj (Uttar Pradesh). Immensely pleased with this success, he could think of no finer way of whiling away his years in India than in more of the same. Then war intervened; in 1846 the East India

Nothing better conveyed the sophistication of early Buddhist society than the frescoes in the cave temples of Ajanta. This is the verandah of Cave 17.





Company entered into hostilities with the Sikh kingdom in the Punjab. Cunningham, a military engineer when not reconstructing India's past, was summoned back to active duty and in the ensuing years the Company's first foray into archaeological sponsorship was gradually forgotten – like Lieutenant Gill at Ajanta.

## One Survey Leads to Another

Quite apart from the reluctance of a commercial organisation like the East India Company to assume curatorial responsibilities and expenditures on behalf of someone else's heritage, Prinsep, Cunningham and all their scholarly contemporaries in British India were now labouring under a mighty handicap. Jones and his disciples had made Indological studies highly regarded. Governors-general like Warren Hastings and Richard Wellesley had talked up India's ancient civilisation by supporting Sanskrit studies, retaining and codifying India's existing legal practices and interfering as little as possible in the social and religious life of their subjects. But under pressure from Christian evangelists and Utilitarian social reformers the climate had changed.

William Bentinck, governor-general from 1828-35, combined a cost-cutting austerity programme with the encouragement of Christian missionary activity and an assault on practices like female infanticide and widow-burning which, though rare, could hardly be tolerated by a progressive administration. This attack on what he called India's 'monstrous



superstitions' was then taken up by Thomas Babington Macaulay. In an 1835 'Minute on Education' which urged the adoption of English as the language of Indian government, Macaulay took the opportunity of rubbishing the entire corpus of Sanskrit literature, ridiculing India's pretensions to civilisation, debunking Indian history and deprecating the 'orientalists' who held these things dear. Macaulay won the day. English instruction triumphed over Bengali, Persian and Sanskrit, while British attitudes to Indian tradition and society hardened. It was not a propitious time to be proposing an archaeological survey.

On the other hand, Cunningham could point to at least one good reason for pursuing the idea: for if the British were inclined to neglect Indology, French and German scholars were happy to assume the lead. Prinsep had never ceased to excite his collaborators with dire warnings about European scholars deciphering scripts and publishing translations ahead of them. National pride was at stake and the foreign competition fierce. With ground-breaking discoveries like those of the Chinese itineraries, French scholarship in particular seemed poised to usurp the primacy established by Jones and Prinsep. Eugène Burnouf's 1844 publication of a magisterial *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism* was further evidence. To rouse the British to a sense of their cultural responsibilities nothing was better calculated than a whiff of French triumphalism.



Cunningham was aware of this, and when in 1861 he once again applied to the government for the institution of an archaeological survey, he made specific mention of another survey - that concerned with the mapping of India and known as the Great Trigonometrical Survey. Begun in Madras in 1802 and completed (in respect of the north-south measurement known as India's Great Arc of the Meridian) at Dehra Dun in 1845, this operation had involved triangulating the face of the country from Kanya Kumari in the extreme south to the Himalayan peaks along the northern frontier. An army of flag-men, lumberjacks and number-crunching 'computers' (these being, in the nineteenth century, men rather than desk-top processors) had been employed in the task. The cost had run to over £150,000, and by way of results a new value had been deduced for the curvature of the earth's surface, and the Himalayas had been established as the world's loftiest mountains; indeed the highest of their peaks was about to be named 'Mount Everest' after the crusty Surveyor-General who had completed the meridional arc.<sup>12</sup> More to the point, India could now be mapped with greater confidence of pin-point accuracy than anywhere else outside Europe. As Cunningham observed, a government that could shoulder such a burden in the name of science could surely find the modest resources to support an archaeological inventory in the name of scholarship.

What Cunningham scarcely needed to add was that the trigonometrical survey had, in



part, been undertaken in response to a French challenge. The methodology and instrumentation for triangulation had been pioneered by the Cassini family in France in the eighteenth century; Britain's Ordnance Survey had been launched in response to it; and until the end of that century the best map of India had been that of the French cartographer d'Anville. Moreover an important consideration in measuring the meridional arc had been to upstage some shorter measurements of the earth's curvature previously undertaken in Peru, Lapland and France itself under the direction of Paris.



## Merimée's Example

Although Cunningham would have been the last person to acknowledge a debt to the French, it seems highly likely that his lobbying for an archaeological survey in India was similarly prompted by Gallic precedents. At the time France led the world in heritage conservation. In Paris 'legislation [for the protection and cataloguing of historic buildings] was passed in 1793 ... further encouragement was given in 1810 to the compilers of local inventories ... and the first state budget for ancient monuments came in 1819.'<sup>13</sup> These measures were followed in 1830 by the appointment of the first Inspector General of Historic Monuments who, four years later, was succeeded in the post by Prosper Merimée. As a distinguished man of letters (and the future author of *Carmen*), as a historical authority and an architectural connoisseur, Merimée





Legitimate excavation being a grey area for the first Archaeological Surveyor, Cunningham's payroll would never approach that of his successors, as here at Harappa.

enjoyed the sort of celebrity accorded in Britain to Sir Walter Scott. His stature lent enormous prestige to the new post and, like Cunningham, he brought to it a strong sense of mission; for just as Cunningham would seem obsessed with reclaiming India's Buddhist heritage, so Merimée devoted himself to rescuing what remained of France's medieval heritage.

Officially '[Merimée's] two over-riding tasks were to list all the outstanding buildings in France and to ensure their preservation.'<sup>14</sup> To this end he had immediately begun a testing series of annual tours that took him to every corner of the country and continued for eighteen years. This was precisely the period – the 1830s and '40s – when Cunningham repeatedly proposed an Indian survey. France's sites and buildings were recorded and illustrated, opinions were given as to their historical and aesthetic importance and measures were taken



for their protection, preservation and, on occasion, their renovation. Over four hundred buildings were listed during Merimée's career as Inspector General. The data-base of France's historic monuments and buildings is to this day known as *Le Base Merimée*.

As outlined in Cunningham's third and decisive 1861 'Memorandum regarding a proposed Investigation of the Archaeological remains of Upper India', annual tours would also be the salient feature of the Indian survey. Maps, inventories, drawings and, ideally, photographs would accompany the reports of every site, just as in France. And in recommending the scheme Cunningham, like Merimée, was careful to avoid contentious subjects. There was no mention at all in the memorandum of Sanskrit literature, of Indian 'civilisation' or of the non-Buddhist provenance – mainly Hindu and Muslim – of most of the country's built heritage. On the other hand Cunningham pulled no punches when prodding the conscience of the administration.

*1. During the one hundred years of British dominion in India [he wrote] the Government has done little or nothing towards the preservation of its ancient monuments, which in the almost total absence of any written history form the only reliable sources of information as to the early condition of the country. Some of these monuments have already endured for ages, and are likely to last for ages still to come; but there are many others which are daily suffering from the effects of*





*time, and which must soon disappear altogether unless preserved by the accurate drawings and faithful descriptions of the archaeologist.*

2. *All that has hitherto been done towards the illustration of ancient Indian history has been due to the unaided efforts of private individuals. These researches have consequently always been desultory and unconnected and frequently incomplete, owing partly to the short stay which individual officers usually make at any particular place, and partly to the limited leisure which could be devoted to such pursuits.*

3. *Hitherto the Government has been chiefly occupied with the extension and consolidation of the Empire, but the establishment of the Trigonometrical Survey shows that it has not been unmindful of the claims of science. It would redound equally to the honour of the British Government to institute a careful and systematic investigation of all the existing monuments of ancient India.*<sup>15</sup>

Cunningham's memorandum then went on to demonstrate that he himself — Prinsep's collaborator in the deciphering of ancient scripts, the author of numerous scholarly monographs on coins, and the excavator of both the Sarnath and Sanchi stupas — was the ideal man for the job. In fact he had already sketched out a programme. To reveal India's ancient past he would locate and identify its most important sites using whatever could be gleaned from two textual



sources: from the mostly Latin accounts of Alexander the Great's foray into India in the fourth century BC, and from the itineraries of those Chinese monks in Buddhist India in the fourth and seventh centuries AD. Moreover, he reckoned that just two tours would suffice for this ambitious programme. 'The first season might be devoted to a survey of [Boddh] Gaya and of Rajagriha [also in Bihar] and all the remains in Tirhut to the eastwards of Goruckpore (Gorakhpur] and Benares [Varanasi], while the survey of all to the westward of Benares would occupy the second season'.<sup>16</sup>

## Orientalism as Orienteering

Naturally Cunningham was cutting his coat to suit the government's cloth. By introducing the vexed question of the route taken by

Decorative stucco work, as on the Dhamekh stupa at Sarnath, was especially vulnerable to the climate.

Accurate drawings or photographs were therefore essential.





Alexander and his Macedonian army he sought to enlist the support of all classicists, and by concentrating on an era that he represented as essentially Buddhist he sought to head off ultra Christian critics of Hindu and Muslim practice. The programme would cost just a few thousand rupees (ie a few hundred pounds) and in return for this investment the government would get 'careful facsimilies of all inscriptions ... ancient coins ... [notes] on all the local traditions' and much else.

*The descriptions of each place, with all its accompanying drawings and illustrations would be complete in itself; and the whole when finished would furnish a detailed and accurate account of the archaeological remains of Upper India.*<sup>17</sup>

Yet however persuasive all this, it was the proposal's timing that proved decisive. Compared to the India of 1848 when Cunningham had last lobbied for a survey, the India of 1861, and especially the 'Upper India' of 1861, was a different place. The trauma of the 1856-7 Great Rebellion (First War of Independence, Sepoy Mutiny) had changed everything. The East India Company had been abolished, the last Mughal ruler had been banished, Indian nationalism had stirred, and the relationship between the British and those they reckoned their subjects had been sensationally soured. In Delhi, Lucknow, Gwalior and a host of other places the built heritage had suffered in the fighting; worse, it was now at the mercy of contractors hastily building railways, bridges and telegraph lines to facilitate troop



movements in the event of another uprising. Yet cool-headed Britons, among them the Viceroy Lord Canning, also recognised a need for reconciliation. (Viceroys had replaced governors-general when the British crown assumed the responsibilities of the East India Company). Intolerant attitudes and insensitive reforms, however supposedly progressive, had alienated much of the Indian population. ‘Clemency Canning’ (as his British critics called him) therefore urged appeasement rather than retribution; and how better to demonstrate this conciliatory approach than by an undertaking aimed at recording and respecting ‘the archaeological remains’ of India?



Besieged by the British during the 1857 Great Rebellion, the fortress of Gwalior was then championed, and parts excavated, by Cunningham and the ASI.

Without further ado and in the unusually short space of six weeks Cunningham’s proposal received the viceregal go-ahead. ‘Colonel A Cunningham of Engineers is appointed Archaeological Surveyor to the Govt of India for employment in Behar and elsewhere with effect from 1st December last [ie 1861],’ ran the official notification.<sup>18</sup>

In reality, Cunningham had already started. The Survey had been verbally approved in November 1861. By December, Cunningham was encamped at Gaya and poring over an inscription that appeared to reveal the date of the Buddha’s death – or rather of his attainment



of *nirvana*. This translated as 477 BC, ‘which,’ noted Cunningham, ‘is the very year that was first proposed by myself as the most probable date of that event’. As always it was good to be right, and buoyed by this benediction, Cunningham rode forth from the unlovely town of Gaya to start work at Bodh Gaya itself.



The ASI's operations may be said to have begun at Boddh Gaya. Cunningham would visit the site repeatedly and recover many of its railing pillars.

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), the most ambitious of its kind at the time (and arguably still), had finally begun. Yet paradoxically there was as yet no such institution. The ASI was just Cunningham himself as the government's archaeological surveyor for Upper India. He had no European staff and no resident '*pandits*'. His establishment comprised just the servants any senior officer would take on a tour of duty – batman, draughtsman, cook, syces (for the horses) and bearers. Labourers, when required, would be hired locally. A basic theodolite, telescope, planetable, measuring chain and drawing materials seem to have been his only specialised equipment, plus a substantial library as his one extravagance.

By now Dr Buchanan's journal of his survey in Bihar in 1811-12 had been belatedly published and it was supplemented by the reports of Kittoe and others. But the most heavily thumbed books in Cunningham's library were undoubtedly the two just published



volumes of Stanislas Julien's *Voyages des Pelerins Bouddhistes*. These included an improved version of the fifth century AD itinerary of the monk Faxian and an expanded translation of *Record of the Western Regions*, an account of the sixteen-years (629-645 AD) spent on the road and in India by the monk Xuanzang.

Much the most informative of the two, Xuanzang's travels had extended across the whole of north and central India from the North West Frontier to Bengal and Maharashtra. As a devout Buddhist, an outstanding scholar and a supposed representative of the great Tang dynasty emperor Taizong, Xuanzang had made it his task to acquire texts and votive objects (his collection of statuary and relics would fill five hundred trunks on his return journey) while visiting and recording every major centre of learning and every site associated with the life of the Buddha. Here was a man after Cunningham's heart. When it came to estimating populations, measuring structures, noting distances or recording extant traditions, Xuanzang displayed all 'the meritorious minuteness and strict correctness' one could wish for. His units of measurement, some Chinese like the li and the earlier *yojana*, required elucidation; allowance also had to be made for the occasional muddle over his bearings; and to any but a Sinologist his transliteration of Indian place names might seem incomprehensible. But to one accustomed to the demands of deciphering unknown scripts, these were mere inconveniences. Other scholars would pounce on the Chinese







This Sarnath statue of Avalokitesvara, a Bodhisatva (or Buddha pre-incarnation), would have been known to Xuanzang under the Chinese name of Guanyin.

narratives for evidence of Indian political conditions in the first millennium AD. Cunningham realised that they revealed rather more than dates and dynasties. Xuanzang, at least, presented a detailed exposition of the geography of northern India twelve hundred years ago. His itineraries could be retraced with such confidence that the new archaeological surveyor would have no hesitation in taking Xuanzang's *Record of the Western Regions* as what he called his 'bible'. Scarcely a day would pass without his consulting it, scarcely a site would be sought without

Xuanzang's help. Zig-zagging through Bihar with a compass in one hand and Xuanzang in the other, Cunningham the orientalist became Cunningham the orienteerist.

## In the Field

The first season (1861-2) went according to plan. Thanks to those scholars who were studying the living Buddhist traditions of Nepal, Sri Lanka and Burma, much more was now known about the role of Buddhism in Indian history. It was accepted that the Buddha was a historical personage (rather than a supernatural one), that his life had been lived in India, that his teachings had been adopted by Indian rulers like Asoka and had spread from there to adjacent countries, and that Buddhism had continued to flourish in India until the time of the first Muslim



invasions in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. Moreover a few of the sites associated with the devotional milestones in the Buddha's life had already been identified. The extensive ruins at Sarnath, into whose great stupa the young Cunningham had led his first 'dig', marked the spot where the Buddha had preached his first sermon; and Boddh Gaya was the hallowed location where the meditating Gautama had earlier achieved Enlightenment, or Buddha-hood. By starting his survey there, Cunningham began where Buddhism had begun. The pipal tree beside the pyramidal temple tower first noted by Buchanan was said to be that under which the Buddha had been fasting and meditating when he actually experienced enlightenment.

*The celebrated Bodhi tree still exists [noted Cunningham] but is very much decayed; one large stem, with three branches to the westward is still green, but the other branches are barkless and rotten.*<sup>19</sup>

Needless to say, 'the tree must have been renewed frequently'; and Cunningham was pleased to note that Xuanzang had been of the same opinion, recording that the site had been vandalised in the late fifth century and the tree replanted by king Amara Deva in c 500. Xuanzang had also gleaned something about the great temple's foundation and had left a record of its measurements plus a description, both of which tallied precisely with Cunningham's. There could therefore 'be no reasonable doubt that the present temple is the same that was seen by him in the seventh century





of our era'. Further, by juxtaposing Faxian's account of Boddh Gaya in c 400 with that of Xuanzang three hundred years later, it was possible to date it more precisely. Since Faxian could scarcely have overlooked such a towering presence yet had made no mention of the temple, it must have been built after his visit, before Xuanzang's, and most probably by the tree-planting Amara Deva in the sixth century.



Conservation often amounted to little more than site clearance in the early days of the ASI, as here at Sarnath.

Over the years Cunningham would return again and again to Boddh Gaya. It became a fixed point in his 'Xuanzang orienteering' and the lodestone of his life's work, just as it was of the Buddha's. Officially, he would send an assistant there in 1875 and would himself revisit the site on his tours of 1871-2, 1877-8 and 1881-2. The discovery and preservation of some of the richly carved stone uprights and crosspieces from what had once been the temple's encircling railing was initiated by him although, as was to be expected of such an oft-rebuilt site, the dating of its structures remained highly contentious.

From Boddh Gaya, via several lesser sites, Cunningham headed north-east to Rajgir and Nalanda. The former had been the capital of Asoka's kingdom of Magadha and the venue for the first Buddhist Council. And the latter had been the foremost centre of Buddhist learning throughout the first millennium; Xuanzang had himself studied there. Their



identification was put beyond doubt by both Chinese pilgrim-monks. Cunningham even pinpointed the cave at Rajgir claimed by Xuanzang to have been where 'Buddha used to meditate after his noon-day meal'.<sup>20</sup>

At Rajgir, Cunningham encountered his first rival. 'I found a Punjab *sepoy* [soldier], with a servant, making an excavation on his own account.' Having satisfied himself that *sepoy* was digging in the wrong place, Cunningham does not appear to have stopped him. Conservation was as yet no part of the Survey's brief and the first legislation to 'prevent injury to and preserve' India's ancient buildings would not be enacted until two years later. At Nalanda, again with the help of Xuanzang, he identified the sites of numerous temples, monasteries and stupas and was satisfied that the extensive mounds and ruins were indeed those of Buddhism's premier university.

In the same region the rock-cut caves at Barabar, later to feature prominently in E M Forster's *Passage to India*, betrayed their antiquity in several short inscriptions in the Asoka Brahmi script. Further north, across the Ganges, Cunningham found a trail of other Asokan reminders at Besarh and Bakra, which place he had previously identified as Vaisali, birthplace of the founder of Jainism, capital of a kingdom of the same name in the Buddha's day and the site of the Second Buddhist Council in c 400 BC. Here an Asoka pillar was noticed, as was another at Lauriya Nandangarh near the Nepalese





border, the latter bearing an inscription of some of Asoka's edicts. Kasia, to the west, he confidently identified with Kusinagara, the site of the Buddha's *parinirvana* (ie where he left this world and achieved *nirvana*). Once again Cunningham based his identification on the directions afforded by Xuanzang, who had also found the place in ruins. In this case the identification would win acceptance, although uncertainty still surrounds the nearby site of the Buddha's birth.

Cunningham probably plotted more of the Buddha's living topography than would anyone. But he was not always right; and his favoured method of confirmation – digging a shaft in search of corroborative inscriptions or plausible relics – was generally undesirable and often perfunctory, two excavations a day being not uncommon. Sometimes it was also impossible. A *saddhu* had taken up residence beside the Asoka pillar at Bakra and elsewhere he was impeded by the presence of a Muslim shrine. He had no authority to commandeer such sites. Indeed leaving them in the care of whoever was in occupation of them was official policy. The accusation that he habitually ignored India's Hindu and Muslim heritage in favour of defunct Buddhist ruins could in part be met by a reminder that Islam and Hinduism were living faiths. Their mosques and temples were jealously guarded by their own religionists and their upkeep was usually funded by endowments and donations administered by a *waqf* or by resident Brahmins. An archaeological surveyor was





In 1862 Cunningham was disgusted to learn that a 'roomful' of Sarnath statues had been used as ballast. Happily this Buddha head survived.



neither wanted nor welcome. Buddhist sites, on the other hand, enjoyed no such patronage and were therefore worthy of investigation, plus such protection as might follow.

And so to Varanasi and Sarnath, where the 1861-2 tour ended. The onset of the hot weather in April would invariably put a stop to operations and, for Cunningham, Sarnath was like a home-coming. It was at least his third visit and he rounded out his season's report with a long resume of all that he and others had previously discovered about the site. The report contains no mention of new finds, rather of losses. A whole roomful of statuary that he had excavated on a previous visit had since 'been carted away by the late Mr Davidson and thrown into the Barna river under the bridge to check the cutting away of the bed beneath the arches'.<sup>21</sup> On the whole he advised against any further excavation

'The world is a bridge, pass over it, but build no house upon it....' The inscription inside the Buland Darwaza of the Fatehpur Sikri mosque (near Agra) echoed the sentiments of the ASI.





of Sarnath's great stupa. Instead, since 'no building with the exception of the Taj Mahal' had been so often described, he suggested some landscaping 'for the purpose of affording easy access to visitors'.

## Expanding Horizons

It would seem that Cunningham spent the monsoon months in the hill-station of Naini Tal, for it was from there that he set out again in November 1862. This, his second tour, should have taken him to the Punjab on the trail of Alexander of Macedon. Instead he devoted the entire season to the western part of Uttar Pradesh including Delhi and Mathura.

Within a week of descending from the hills he was back on the trail of Xuanzang and chalking up another discovery – that of a pre-Buddhist city mentioned in the *Mahabharata*. In small but neat handwriting he recorded the event in the pad of tabulated foolscap used for his 'Daily Report of Occupations and Duties'.

*24, 25, 26, 27 November. From Soron to Ramnaggar. Miles: 53.*

*I visited this place with the expectation of finding the ancient city of Ahichchitra, described by the Chinese pilgrim [Xuanzang]. My expectations were realised by the discovery of an extensive ruined fort, nearly 4 miles in circumference, which still bears the name Ai-chutter. The stupa or Buddhist tope described by the Chinese pilgrim still exists. It is 75 feet in diameter and 40 feet in*





*height. On the day of my arrival and 3 following days I was engaged in making a survey of the ruins and superintending numerous excavations. I closed work on the 30th. Ahichchitra is the 'Adisadra' of Ptolemy.*<sup>22</sup>

The Punjab would have to wait till 1863-4; and it would be followed in 1864-5 by a troll through what is now northern Rajasthan and adjacent parts of Madhya Pradesh. Presumably a doubling of the two years originally projected for the survey had been approved on the strength of his first season's work. 'The value and importance of his investigations fully justify the anticipations which were entertained by Lord Canning,' noted the British government's Secretary of State for India.<sup>23</sup>

By now Cunningham was fifty, a formidable presence and the recognised authority on Buddhist India. By defining Indian archaeology on his own terms he had effectively appropriated it; moreover he brought to the survey a military rank and a breadth of experience unmatched by any contemporary antiquarian; and 'like all his father's family,' recalled a later obituarist, 'he was a big man'.<sup>24</sup> He was not, though, the archetypal English *sahib* suggested by a later portrait of him as a walrus-mustachioed grampus. For one thing, he was Scottish, and for another, of comparatively humble birth, in fact the grandson of an Ayrshire stone-mason who had been befriended by Robert Burns, and the son of Allan



Cunningham, also a stonemason, the editor of Burns's works and himself a writer of ballads. Literature and stonecraft ran in the family, not governance and command; and it was to Sir Walter Scott, the champion of all things romantic, ruinous and Scottish, that the young Alexander had been indebted for his Indian career.

By the 1820s the Cunninghams had removed to London. There 'honest Allan' (as Scott called the father) combined literary journalism with work as a purchaser of stone for Francis Chantrey, sculptor of innumerable busts, monuments and equestrian statues. Sir Walter, the literary colossus of the age and a regular visitor at both the Chantrey and Cunningham households, learned at the latter that John Davey, the eldest of the Cunninghams' four sons, sought a commission in the British army. 'Honest Allan', however, deplored the idea and wished that the boy 'could go to India, for there the pay is a maintenance [ie sufficient for someone without private means] and one does not need interest [ie influence] at every step to get on'.

Scott had duly taken the hint. On the Cunningham boy's behalf he applied for a military cadetship to both the President of the Board of Control for India and to one of the directors of the East India Company.



A load-bearing frieze  
from Chir Tope, Taxila.  
The son and grandson  
of stonemasons,  
Cunningham relished  
dressed stone but ignored  
reports of undressed  
megaliths.



Such was the great man's reputation that both applications were successful. Passing on the good news, Scott mused that it sometimes happened that an angler hooked a trout on his fly and then found he had another on 'the bobber' [a secondary fly or 'dropper']. 'I have done so,' he told Chantrey, 'and I think I shall land them both.' As a result, when Joseph Davey sailed for India in 1832, the next brother, Alexander, had sailed with him.

Both boys prospered. While Alexander had been first posted to Varanasi, where he immediately began excavating the Sarnath stupa and collaborating with James Prinsep, Joseph Davey served eight years on the Sikh frontier before being appointed political agent at Bhopal. There he wrote a still admired history of the Sikhs while Alexander went off to fight them – in the first of the two Anglo-Sikh wars.

The carve-up of the Sikh kingdom that followed spawned the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, to define whose borders with Tibet the now Captain Alexander Cunningham was deputed to lead a boundary commission. This failed in its main objective; no Chinese boundary commissioners turned up. But in the still Buddhist land of Ladakh, in Kashmir and in and around Swat on the return journey, Cunningham pursued his own interests. 'He arrived back in Simla in 1848 with a camel load of Buddhist statuary, three unknown Sanskrit dramas and "the oldest dated inscription hitherto found in India". It



was not quite what the Governor-General had expected ...'<sup>25</sup> He also wrote a book, *Ladak, Physical, Statistical, and Historical*, that, while living up to its uninspiring title, remains a mine of information on the country and its religious traditions.

In 1850 the brothers had been reunited when Alexander visited Bhopal. He did so not just to see Joseph Davey but to study and excavate the stupas at nearby Sanchi, (otherwise 'The Bhilsa Topes' as per the title of his next book). It turned out to be the brothers' last meeting. For in 1851 Joseph Davey, who was already in disgrace for criticisms of his superiors in his *History of the Sikhs*, died suddenly, aged 39. Soon after, Alexander was posted to Multan (Punjab), an ideal location for collecting the Bactrian and Kusana coins on which the history of the north-west was being largely reconstructed, and then in 1856 he was sent to

Known to Cunningham as the great Bhilsa Tope, the main stupa at Sanchi (near Bhopal) retained its richly carved gateways on site and almost intact.







Sculpted reliefs on Sanchi's gateway pillars date from the 1st century BC and never depict the Buddha in person. His presence is indicated by associated objects, like a vacant throne.

Burma as chief engineer. He stayed there for three years and was thus spared the great Great Rebellion (Sepoy Mutiny/First War of Independence). Instead, like Buchanan, he acquired some first hand knowledge of Burmese Buddhism.

A colonel in Burma, Alexander Cunningham was raised to the rank of major-general when he officially retired from the army in 1862. After thirty years unbroken service he must have felt entitled to some

home leave; married since 1840 and with at least one son, he may have also have been under some pressure from his family. But, still only 48, he was not about to end his career. Retirement from the army was a mere formality; as the lately appointed Archaeological Surveyor to the Government of India, it was simply impossible for him to moonlight as a serving officer. On the other hand, an archaeological surveyor with thirty years service and the rank of major-general could expect – and did – more in the way of consideration than the likes of Kittoe. If the ASI was not as yet an institution, Cunningham himself was steadily becoming one.

From Ahichchitra and Sankissa, whose fame extended even to what Cunningham always spelled as 'Barma' (ie Burma), the second tour



continued to Kanauj and Allahabad. Much to his disgust, someone had planted potatoes in Kanauj's ancient Suraj-kund (a temple pond or tank) and, more surprisingly, Xuanzang had somehow overstated the distance thence to Allahabad. Cunningham, his faith in the Chinese monk unshakeable, could only assume that there had been 'an accidental alteration' of the monk's figures, say '600 *li* for 60 *li* or 700 *li* for 70 *li*'. In his later Report of the tour he devoted three dense pages to arguing which of these errors was the more likely.

Another lengthy discussion of directional discrepancies, this time as between Faxian and Xuanzang, introduced his account of Ayodhya. Once famous as the city of Lord Ram – and as of 1992 independent India's most noxious bone of communal contention – Cunningham wrote of Ayodhya in ignorance of the scrutiny to which his words might one day be subjected. 'The whole place wears a look of decay,' he reported, 'There are no high mounds of ruins, covered with broken statues and sculptured pillars, such as mark the sites of other ancient cities, but only a low irregular mass of rubbish heaps...'. The temples were all 'of modern date and without any architectural pretensions whatsoever'. Although they occupied the sites of earlier temples he was undecided whether these had fallen into decay prior to the Muslim incursions or been destroyed during them. Since Xuanzang had little or nothing to say about the actual birthplace of Lord Ram, neither did Cunningham. He noted merely that 'the *Janam Asthan* or Birth-place temple'





The Mughal *zenana* palace in Allahabad Fort. Orienteering his travels with Xuanzang's account, Cunningham was here perplexed by discrepancies in the Chinese monk's distances.

was located 'in the very heart of the city'. Also there, presumably, was the contentious mosque built by Babur, the first Mughal emperor. But he didn't mention it.

Of greater interest was a site called Sahet Mahet that Cunningham identified as the ancient Sravasti, another of 'the most celebrated places in the annals of Buddhism'. Here the jungle had so encroached that the ruins were impossible to measure. Paths were nevertheless hacked through to the main sites and his excavations were rewarded with the discovery of a colossal Buddha, over seven feet tall though badly mutilated. Its reddish pock-marked stone he recognised as that of Mathura, to which place he proceeded before ending the tour in Delhi. Oddly, Delhi was one of the few places that had completely escaped Xuanzang's attention. An explanation was required, and Cunningham duly supplied it in a wordy account of the



city's chequered history and its shortage of pre-Islamic monuments. He terminated his second annual report with a round-up of the great set-pieces of Delhi's Mughal architecture but deemed them 'too well known to need any detailed description'.

## Winding Up

The next two tours, those of 1863-4 and 1864-5, followed the same pattern. The first, that to the Punjab, yielded some fine examples of Gandhara sculpture and two new discoveries. One was probably wrong. The mysterious fastness of Aornos, where Alexander the Great had encountered stiff resistance in 326 BC, was identified with the rocky eminence of Ranighat near Mardun. Cunningham had stopped there on his way back from Ladakh in 1848 but he was this time frustrated by 'the war on the Buner frontier'. He therefore recycled the doubtful conclusions of his previous visit. More certainly, with Xuanzang's help he also explored the site of the great city of Taxila (near Rawalpindi/Islamabad).

Noticed by several Classical authors as well as the Chinese pilgrims, Taxila was arguably Cunningham's most important identification. Supposedly witness to one of the Buddha's miracles, the city had been the powerbase from which Asoka had launched his bid for empire and a major centre of trade and both Buddhist and Hindu scholarship from c 300 BC – c 700 AD. It was also vast – about 25 square miles. 'I have traced the remains of 55



topes [stupas], 28 monasteries and 9 temples, of which the largest are quite the equal in size to any that have yet been discovered.’<sup>26</sup> Years would be needed just to survey the site. When in 1906 the Archaeological Survey was reconstituted on a more professional basis, Taxila would reveal itself as in fact three cities and would claim the attention of the greatly enlarged Survey for more than two decades.



The remains of Taxila (near Rawalpindi, Pakistan) are spread over 25 square miles. It was arguably Cunningham's most important identification but systematic excavation would have to wait until the 1920s.

At Taxila, Cunningham also noted coins galore and a bewildering variety of inscriptions, some of which were referred to the young Bengali, Rajendralal Mitra, in Calcutta. Rather more than Cunningham's 'Bengali babu', Mitra was the rising star of Indian epigraphy. He would be the first Indian to challenge the European monopoly of Indian archaeology and the first to become president of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Cunningham at least had the sense to recognise his talents, even if he did not always acknowledge them.

To reach Taxila, the Survey had worked its way west along the wooded Himalayan perimeter from Naini Tal. In the Rohilkand terai they found the jungle so dense and the tigers so numerous that it was 'both difficult and dangerous to trace the ruins'. Further west, at a spot where Xuanzang had been waylaid by bandits and relieved of his clothes, Cunningham narrowly escaped a similar fate.



‘During the night the tent was three times approached by parties of robbers, who were detected by the vigilance of my watchdog’. It was not his policy to sully official reports with those personal details beloved of biographers but in this instance they so nicely corroborated ‘old Xuanzang’ that he made an exception.

More jungles and tigers were to be expected when in 1864 he sallied out for Central India. In the event this fourth tour proved unproductive of either dangers or discoveries. It was nevertheless instructive. Of the cities and sites visited – principally Jaipur, Ajmer, Narwar, Gwalior, Chanderi and Khajuraho – scarcely any had Buddhist associations; yet nearly all had been, or still were, Rajput strongholds. In British eyes the Rajputs represented the acceptable face of Hindu India. Their reputation for valour, even chivalry, was legendary, their ‘feudal’ clan structures were often likened to those of the Scottish Highlands and their desert strongholds could not fail to excite the romantically minded. The man mainly responsible for this favourable press was Colonel James Todd (‘In a Rajput I always recognise a friend’) who, as an antiquarian and political agent, had spent the 1830s among the Rajputs and had then written two hefty works on them. Cunningham may have known Todd; he certainly knew his books.

In Gwalior’s fort Cunningham belied his obsession with Buddhist monuments to undertake conservation work on the twin Sasbahu Temples.

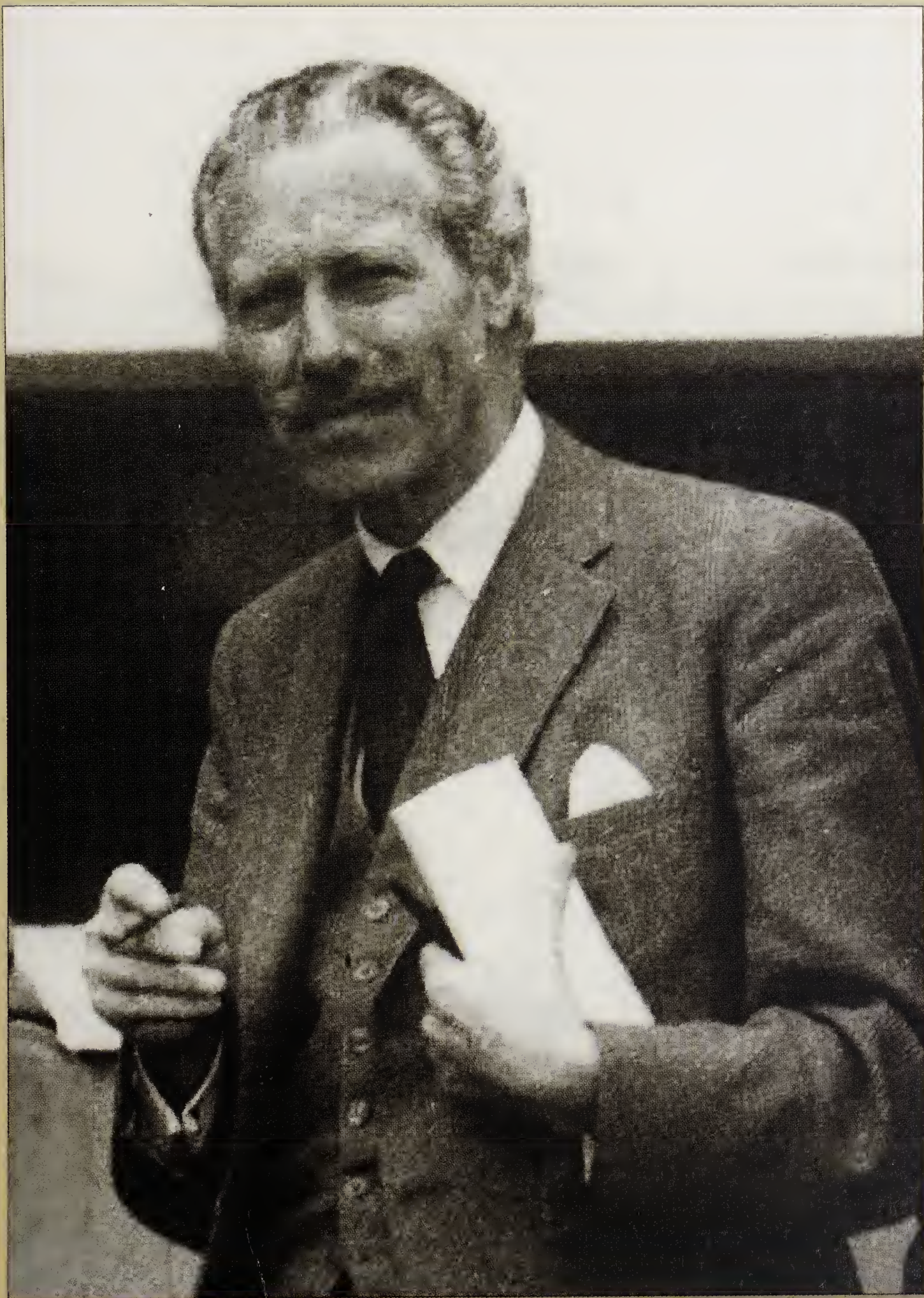




But he distrusted them. Tod had derived his information less from inscriptions and texts than from Rajput bards and princely informants. To Cunningham this was anathema; both were notoriously unreliable. His tour would expose their errors, and in a report that was more a reconstruction of Rajput history than an archaeological inventory, he took every opportunity to dissect Tod's version of events.

It was as if he was spoiling for a fight. Yet so, it seems, were most of his archaeological peers. The conviction with which nineteenth-century antiquarians announced their discoveries was matched only by the combative language in which they defended them. Like the contemporary giants of geographical exploration – H M Stanley, for instance, or Sven Hedin – the titans of archaeology were seldom cautious or self-effacing. As demonstrated by the impossible Heinrich Schliemann, who in the late 1860s was poised to begin his excavations at Troy, permissions and funding demanded publicity, and publicity thrived on conviction. Cunningham followed the fashion. As India's first British archaeological surveyor he was probably no more opinionated than its last, the revered Sir Mortimer Wheeler. Nor did his provocative public persona exclude the possibility of personal charm. One who seems to have known Cunningham well would remember him as 'most gentlemanly, courteous, affable and full of interesting information'.<sup>27</sup>





A man of strong views like Cunningham, Sir Mortimer Wheeler was the last British Director General of the ASI, holding the post from 1944-48.



‘The most famous collection of magnificent temples in Upper India’ was Cunningham’s verdict on Khajuraho (MP). From their inscriptions he reconstructed the succession of their Chandela rulers.



His report of the 1864-5 tour – and with it, this first phase of his archaeological survey – ended with a thorough examination of the great complex of tenth-to-twelfth-century temples at Khajuraho in what is now Madhya Pradesh. Cunningham conjectured that the site corresponded to one visited by Xuanzang and must therefore have been the capital of a dynasty prior to that of the temple-building Chandela Rajputs. More surprisingly given the lack of Buddhist remains and the explicit nature of some of the *mithuna* statues – ‘all ... are highly indecent and most of them are disgustingly obscene’ – he became quite enamoured of the place. It was not his discovery, and his detailed account positively invited the censure of straight-laced contemporaries. Yet

confronted by what he called ‘the most famous collection of magnificent temples in Upper India’ he betrayed a wide knowledge of Hindu mythology and a genuine concern for the conservation of the site.

On a later visit, when he found that some temple architraves and pillars had been incorporated into the local *rajah’s* new palace, he would draw attention to the theft and remonstrate with the culprit. Meanwhile Rajendralal Mitra’s trans-



lation of the innumerable inscriptions enabled him to pen a history of the Chandelas in which Buddhism is barely mentioned. Well before the General-cum-surveyor became the surveyor-general his interests were widening. Jain sculptures, particularly the giant figures along the approach to the fortress of Gwalior and the several Jain temples at Khajuraho, received due attention; and Islamic architecture he now claimed to be reserving for separate study and a separate publication.







Worship of the Bodhi Tree, a scene depicted on the sculpted medallions of the Bharhut stupa, Madhya Pradesh.



# III

## *The First Director General*

In 1866, Cunningham and his family sailed back to London. Alicia, his wife, was unwell and he in need of rest. The two years of the survey had run to four and the government of the day decided that it should now be wound up. With Upper India more or less inventoried, its history charted, and the multiplicity and importance of its sites established, Sir John Lawrence, the retrenching Governor-General, may have considered its task done. The rest of the country was anyway beyond Cunningham's competence. Xuanzang never went south of the Narmada; neither, with one minor exception, would Cunningham. 'Of southern India I have seen nothing,' he would later confess, 'and of Western India I have seen only Bombay with the celebrated caves of Elephanta and Kanheri'.<sup>28</sup> He had, though, given a convincing demonstration of the priority that should be accorded to what the Secretary of State called 'the preservation of the historical monuments and their accurate descriptions'; now it was up to Government to decide how to proceed.



In London the general joined the board of the Delhi and London Bank and devoted himself to writing an ambitious work on *The Ancient Geography of India*. Only one volume – 700 pages on ‘The Buddhist Period’ – was ever completed. Naturally it drew heavily on his earlier explorations; and inevitably it read like an extended commentary on Xuanzang’s text. It appeared in 1871, but without the support of the author. By then he was already back in India, and this time not as Archaeological Surveyor to the Government of India but as Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India (hitherto ASI). The age of the amateur antiquarian was over. Archaeology had claimed its place as a department of government.

During his four-year absence much had changed in India. Specifically, two suggestions affecting India’s heritage had been adopted, neither of them very fruitful: the then government had experimented with devolving responsibility for archaeology from the central government to the provincial governments in Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay and Madras; and archaeology itself had undergone some redefinition. The new approach stressed the aesthetic and educational value of ancient monuments as much as their historical interest. Priority was to be given to the high-quality illustration and photography of them and to the publication and distribution of such reproductions; the reproductions might also serve as a contemporary record should the sites be damaged and thought worth restoring. Sculptures that might be at risk and could



easily be moved were to be housed in museums; and, at the suggestion of the Council of Education, Science and Art in London, moulds were to be taken from those that could not be moved so that they too could be exhibited, albeit as plaster casts, and a record of them preserved.

The government of Bombay province had responded to these directives by fielding three operatives, among them James Burgess, a future Director General of the ASI and an architectural specialist whose main interests would focus on the rock-cut cave temples of western India and their inscriptions. In addition, Rajendralal Mitra, Cunningham's 'Bengali babu', conducted an exhaustive and highly regarded survey of hitherto neglected Orissa, publishing the results in two hefty volumes. And in the north Lieutenant Henry Hardy Cole photographed extensively and took moulds of one of the great gateways at Sanchi. In 112 sections the plaster casts were shipped to London and reassembled for display in what is now the Victoria and Albert Museum.

But, poorly funded and piecemeal, these efforts left the vast majority of the sites recorded by Cunningham uncared for and highly vulnerable. On his very first tour, Cunningham had become uncomfortably familiar with the name of 'Reuben Burrow'. It was everywhere, gouged into Asokan pillars, scribbled on stupa railings, scratched even on Buddha statues. In the 1780s the 'uncouth genius' responsible for this vandalism had taken it upon himself





to wander round Bengal recording latitudes by solar observation and leaving his mark wherever he went. Cunningham was not amused. The British *sahib* could be every bit as insensitive to India's heritage as the local villager who purloined a piece of temple to patch up his house.

In 1870, word of such depredations led a new Secretary of State for India to chide the Calcutta government for shirking its archaeological responsibilities and not even 'prevent[ing] its own servants from wantonly accelerating the decay'.<sup>29</sup> The Secretary of State was John Campbell, Duke of Argyll, a man with crumbling castles of his own to maintain who must have appreciated the need for state support. His recommendation that the central Government resume responsibility for India's archaeological heritage accorded well with the thinking of Lord Mayo, the new viceroy; and in a minute written in May 1870 Mayo recommended that 'General Cunningham should at once be communicated with' to elicit his opinion and explore his availability. 'The time is come,' wrote Mayo, 'when a great and enlightened Govt. can no longer neglect contributing to the archaeological literature of the world.' Only by 'systematic investigations into monuments and remains which perhaps are unequalled in their historical and archaeological value' could this situation be rectified.<sup>30</sup>

Cunningham's response was to sail immediately. His health and that of his wife



had improved and his finances were not such that he could ignore the offer, By February 1871 he was back in Bihar, beginning where he had begun ten years previously – tracing with the help of Xuanzang the remains in and around Boddh Gaya. With an enlarged establishment he began copying inscriptions, assembling and studying the stone railings of the main temple and drawing a new plan of it.

Here as elsewhere, monkeys as well as bats were much in evidence. Xuanzang, too, had noticed them; and he had further delighted his Chinese readers with stories of Hanuman, the monkey-like god of the *Ramayan*. But of the pivotal part the monkey had come to play in connection with Xuanzang's later reputation in China, Cunningham was quite unaware. Initially Xuanzang's reputation had rested on his many translations into Chinese of the devotional texts he had brought back from India, plus the exotic appeal of his travel narrative, the *Record of the Western Regions*. But by the sixteenth century that narrative had acquired a life of its own in China. Fictionalised and fantasised as *Journey to the West*, it had become the best loved and most abiding work of fiction in the whole of Chinese literature. *Journey to the West* relegates Xuanzang to playing second fiddle to Su Wugong, a monkey-hero endowed with supernatural powers and unrivalled prowess in



ASI employees like Carlleyle and Beglar were directed to pay close attention to any images found on site, whether revered or ignored. This collection was photographed near Jabalpur (MP).



the martial arts. In fact the story is often called *The Monkey-King* or just *Monkey*. As such it has been published, serialised, illustrated, animated, adapted and filmed more than either *The Thousand and One Nights* or the tales of Hans Christian Andersen. And thus, by the most serendipitous of associations, Prosper Merimee's *Carmen*, Sir Walter Scott's *Rob Roy* and China's super-hero 'Monkey' may be said to have first encountered one another in the ample but unlikely figure of the first Director General of the ASI.

The Purana Qila was among the many Islamic sites in Delhi surveyed by Joseph Beglar. When New Delhi's Rajpath was planned, the 'old fort' at one end was supposed to complement Rashtrapati Bhawan at the other.

While Cunningham fended off monkeys in Bihar his two new assistants were putting into practice among the Islamic ruins of Delhi and Agra the detailed instructions he had drawn up specially for them. Of Joseph Davis Beglar





and Archibald Campbell Carlleyle not a lot is known. Beglar was evidently an Indian-born Armenian and an engineer, Carlleyle presumably Scottish and lately curator of a museum in Agra. Beglar had some knowledge of photography and Carlleyle of prehistory. Neither was a scholar but Carlleyle's interest in pre-historic sites went some way to redressing the indifference of Cunningham and his ASI to the sensational discoveries made in the 1860's by palaeontologists like Robert Bruce Foote of the Geological Survey of India.

In an introduction to his later index of the ASI's annual reports, Vincent Smith, an eminent historian in his day, would summarily dismiss both Beglar and Carlleyle as amateurs, if not charlatans:

*The crude and unscientific speculations of General Cunningham's assistants, which waste so much space in several volumes of the Reports, have been passed over very lightly, and the Index gives few indications of their existence.*<sup>31</sup>

Yet Cunningham seems to have developed an 'extremely supportive' relationship with them. At one point he even offered to forfeit part of his salary so that their own could be increased. The direction was entirely his, as was the editing of their reports, yet his confidence in their abilities was such as to let them conduct their own annual tours, often hundreds of miles away. Carlleyle would move on from Agra to eastern Rajasthan in 1872, Bengal in 1873, and would then track between UP, Bihar





and Bengal from 1874-80. He was eventually dismissed for a combination of unpaid debts and suspected mental instability. Beglar operated further south – in Bundelkhand and Malwa in 1872, Bihar and Bengal in 1873, and Orissa and central India again in 1874-6. As of 1880 he was engaged in supervising some controversial restoration work at Bodh Gaya. A Henry Baily Wade Garrick took over his survey responsibilities, conducting tours in Bihar in 1881 and thereafter mostly in the Punjab. The number of recorded monuments duly doubled, then doubled again; so did the reports of well known sites having been vandalised and of inscribed stones lost.

Many of Cunningham's generation were wrongly persuaded that Graeco-Roman influence in the Gandhara art of Taxila meant that India owed its sculptural traditions to the Mediterranean world.



## On The Road Again

Cunningham himself continued to take the field at the onset of the cold weather and would do so every year from 1871-2 until 1884-5. This took him past his sixtieth birthday and then his seventieth. Looking as much bloodhound as walrus, and with a girth now excessive even for one of his height, he mercifully spared the horses and travelled more by palanquin, elephant or occasionally train. In 1872-3 he was back in the Punjab. With 'a company of Sappers' at his disposal he could undertake more ambitious excavations and at Shahbazgarhi unearthed



a large cache of ‘Indo-Scythian’ Buddhist statuary. More commonly ascribed to the ‘Gandhara’ school of sculpture, these depictions of Buddhist figures in Classical attire disposed among Graeco-Roman columns and acanthus leaves were attracting much interest at the time. To some they suggested that Indian expertise in sculpture owed everything to ancient Greek models and workmanship. Cunningham was more circumspect, yet he nevertheless wrongly judged that their ‘boldness of design and freedom of execution’ argued against their being the work of ‘Eastern artists’.

At Sahri-bahlol he purchased a standing crop of wheat to enable excavation of the field in which it was growing, and at Jamal-garhi the sappers were again called on to exhume Gandhara reliefs. Heading south alongside the new Lahore – Multan railway he paused beside ‘a continuous line of mounds about 3,500 feet in length and 2 ½ miles in circuit’. The place he knew as ‘Harapa’; he had visited it twice in the 1850s when stationed at Multan. But he was still at a loss to know what to make of it. Some observers had supposed the main mound to be the footings of a castle, others of a vast Hindu temple.

*{In the 1850s} I traced the remains of flights of steps on both the eastern and western faces of the high mound to the north-west, as well as the basement of a large square building. ... The walls were very massive; but the whole have now been removed to form ballast for the Railway. Perhaps the best idea of the extent of the ruined*



*brick mounds at Harapa may be formed from the fact that they have more than sufficed to furnish brick ballast for about 100 miles of the Lahor and Multan Railway.<sup>32</sup>*



Removing a skeleton from a grave at Harappa. The excavations at Mohenjo-daro (Sind, Pakistan) and at Harappa would reward the relaunched ASI with the discovery of the oldest urban civilisation in South Asia.

The traces of another building could have been those of a Buddhist monastery, and as usual Cunningham was inclined to identify the site with that of a city noticed by Xuanzang. The Chinese monk had rendered its name as 'Po-fa-to-lo', though by no stretch of the translitterative imagination could this represent 'Harapa'. Nor was there any Buddhist statuary. The only finds of note were three large undulated rings of stone, each two to three feet in diameter and quite unlike anything he had seen before, plus some very small items collected by a military colleague.

*The most curious object discovered at Harapa is a seal belonging to Major Clark, which was found along with two small objects like chess pawns, made of dark brown jasper ... The seal is a smooth black stone without polish. On it is engraved very deeply a bull, without hump, looking to the right with two stars under its neck. Above the bull there is an inscription in six characters that are quite unknown to me. They are certainly not Indian letters; and as the bull which accompanies them is without hump, I conclude that the seal is foreign to India.<sup>33</sup>*



Once again, Cunningham was spectacularly wrong. In the 1920s Indian and British archaeologists working under John Marshall, the first professional archaeologist to head the ASI, would show these remains to date from the fourth to third millennia BC and to be those of a vast urban civilisation. Undreamed of by Cunningham it would become famous as the Harappan Civilisation or that of the Indus Valley.

Among the many criticisms levelled at Cunningham by his successors, that of overlooking the importance of his Harappan finds is often rated the most serious. Had he been less fixated on Xuanzang and the Buddhist heritage, he might not have been blind to the fact that at Harappa he had stumbled on a civilisation as old again as Asoka; and as a result, something might have been done about protecting what remained

Cunningham failed to realise that the extensive brick mounds at Harappa pertained to a period much earlier than Buddhism. As a result the discovery of India's oldest civilisation had to wait until the twentieth century.







of it. Certainly he knew little, and cared less, about pre-history. But Carlleyle took a lively interest in the subject in central India, and in peninsular India Captain Meadows Taylor and others had made important strides in the listing and study of prehistoric megaliths and dolmens. Cunningham applauded these efforts and was not incurious about the Harappan finds. Studying the characters on the 'bull seal' he would later conclude that they might indeed be Indian and a precursor of the Asoka Brahmi script. Considering that they remain undeciphered to this day, it seems harsh to disparage his speculations, however unproductive.

The accusation that he might have done more to protect the site may also be misplaced. By the time he visited it as Director General of the ASI the damage had been done. Had he possessed the authority and the funds to explore the site in the 1850s it might indeed have been spared the depredations of the railway contractors; but by the 1870s it was too late. Spread along 100 miles of railway track, Harappa's brickwork left few surface clues on site as to the nature of the structures from which it had originated. Even John Marshall at the head of Lord Curzon's handsomely funded ASI would not get around to investigating Harappa until 1908, the first report being that of Hiranand Sastri in 1909.

In 1873-4, Cunningham was back in Central India and notching up another major find. Travelling what he called 'the high road



between Ujjain and Bhilsa {ie Sanchi] in the south, and Kosambi and Sravasti in the north', he spied a stupa-shaped mound from which protruded some dark columns. It was about half-way between Allahabad and Jabalpur and he probably owed its sighting to the vantage enjoyed from the height of his elephant's howdah. Dismounting, he ascertained that it was indeed a stupa, about the size of the largest at Sanchi, the protruding columns being those of the uprights of its encircling stone pallisade.

'The curious sculptures were a source of much wonder...' Excavation of the Bharhut stupa was watched by many interested parties. To preserve the sculptured railings, they were removed to the Indian Museum in Calcutta.

Three months later he was back with a team of diggers; and with Beglar and his camera, he returned again in late 1874 and in 1876. The site had long since been vandalised and robbed of much brickwork, plus any stonework that was visible and remotely portable. Some pieces were discovered serving as lintels in the nearby village of Bharhut; one was being used as the rock on which the village *dhobi* whacked his laundry; others had been incorporated into the house of a local *thakur* or laird. But much of great interest was still buried in the mound. As whole pillars and sections of gateway frames were extracted from the rubble, a crowd of onlookers gathered. 'The curious sculptures were a source of much wonder ... that





grew all the greater when it became known that the *lat sahib* [ie Cunningham himself] could read the writing that accompanied the carving.<sup>34</sup> But the readings from the Asoka Brahmi inscriptions were mostly of donor records like those from Sanchi that had helped Prinsep decipher the script in the first place. Cunningham's disappointed audience melted away. 'Their only idea of such excavations is that they are really intended as a search for hidden treasure.'

Steeped in Buddhism, Cunningham was able to recognise the scenes depicted on the sculpted medallions of the Bharhut stupa. This one portrayed Queen Maya's dream of giving birth to the Buddha.

For Cunningham himself the richly carved railings and busy reliefs were treasure enough. He was now so steeped in Buddhist lore that he could recognise the scenes depicted and recall the *jataka* stories they illustrated. He was probably wrong to suppose the sculptures dated from as early as Asoka's third century BC, though the stupa itself did.

The discovery of the Bharhut stupa attracted international interest, followed by not a little controversy. With so much of the statuary now exposed by his excavations, the likelihood of the site being re-raided was high. The local treasure seekers remained hopeful; even the larger stones might be split and carted away as building materials. Moreover Bharhut, like Sanchi, lay





in one of India's many princely states and so was outside the territories directly ruled by the British. The stupa's fate thus rested with the local rajah who, not being a Buddhist, might consider it fair game. Cunningham therefore welcomed the idea, first floated by Rajendralal Mitra, of removing the sculpted railings to the safety of the Asiatic Society's museum in Calcutta. The *rajah* was persuaded to agree and the stones were carted off to the nearest railway station. Purists, however, argued that this was just another form of vandalism; monuments should be left *in situ* and the site itself protected. Cunningham might normally have agreed; but some five years later he offered an explanation for making this major exception:



*I am willing to accept the aroma [of vandalism] since I have saved all the more important sculptures. [For] of those that were left behind every stone that was removable has since been 'carted away' for building purposes.<sup>35</sup>*

At least the Bharhut stupa's uprooted railings stayed in India. Resisting demands for their removal to a British museum, Cunningham had them installed in what became Calcutta's Indian Museum, where they remain to this day.

## Winding Down

Just how many miles Cunningham covered in his sixty odd years in India would be a challenging calculation. Certainly no other contemporary can have approached even his



total for the fifteen years in which he was directing the ASI. In 1875-8 and 1881-5 he made four more tours in Bihar and UP , in 1878-9 he was back in the Punjab and in 1880-82 he was criss-crossing the middle Ganges. The following year found him roaming between Delhi and Gwalior, before returning to Central India for his two final tours of 1883-5.

During the last he confounded those later critics who would accuse him of ignoring domestic architecture by devoting two pages of his published report to 'a large stone dwelling house' in a village called Chilla. It was 12 miles south-west of Allahabad and 'the building is of some interest, as so few specimens now exist of early Indian domestic architecture.'<sup>36</sup> He could think of only two others, one of them found by Beglar in Rajasthan, plus the 16<sup>th</sup> century Man Singh palace that crowns the heights at Gwalior. His emphasis on religious sites simply reflected the fact that prior to the seventeenth century the durable qualities of stone and the skills required to work it were largely reserved for prestigious or devotional structures.

He also continued to confound those who would accuse him of ignoring Hindu temples in favour of Buddhist ruins. Khajuraho's complex drew him time and again; and at Sanchi, Tigowa and elsewhere he paid close attention to some often modest Hindu temples that, on the basis of their inscriptions, he dated to the age of the imperial Guptas. Unfortunately the dates he ascribed to the



Guptas were themselves consistently out by about two centuries. The antiquity of these temples was not quite as great as he supposed. Yet he was right in thinking them amongst the earliest examples of stone-built Hindu architecture (as opposed to rock-cut 'architecture') and therefore important evidence of the evolution of the Hindu temple.

By now his frame of reference was as extensive geographically as it was historically. He also digressed into ethnology, extrapolating from the distribution of different castes, crafts or traditions the likelihood of ancient migrations or more recent dispersals. Routes were a favourite subject, rivers a constant delight. Quite probably no one has ever seen so much of Upper India or come to know it better than Cunningham. Yet his official reports contain scarcely a mention of the pleasures and hardships involved. In the absence of such personal detail, any student of the ASI may

At Sanchi, and elsewhere, the pioneers of the ASI identified small temples of the Gupta era (4-6th century AD) as among the earliest surviving Hindu structures.





surely be forgiven for a speculative flutter.

*A little crusty as he approached his seventies, very possessive about his own discoveries and jealous of his unquestioned pre-eminence, Cunningham and his Archaeological Survey ... descend on some forgotten group of temples. The tents are up as the old General emerges, stooping, from a sculpture-encrusted mandapam. His tweeds reek with the sickly smell of bat dung; but a quick 'tub' and he is back to work, recording the day's discoveries on a shaky camp table. As the sun dips behind the trees and the parakeets go screeching home to roost, the lamp is lit and, issuing instructions for an early start in the morning, the General retires to bed with a dog-eared copy of Xuanzang.<sup>37</sup>*

By the 1880s Cunningham would not allow even the 'highly indecent' statuary of Khajuraho's Vishwanath Temple to stunt his growing enthusiasm for India's Hindu heritage.



That there were indeed mishaps and disasters need not be doubted. In 1883-4, while exploring the hill fortresses of the Chandelas near Khajuraho, he reports of one site that it was 'overrun with jungle in which both tigers and leopards find cover'. Elsewhere snakes are encountered and bandits repelled. But of what seems to have been his near-fatal and probably decisive accident he says nothing at all.

This must have occurred during his last tour of 1884-



1885 in Central India. Even his obituary merely mentions it in passing: being ‘a big man,’ writes the obituarist, ‘a fall which he had from an elephant at fully seventy years of age injured him severely’. The ‘seventy years’ seems to place the fall in the course of 1884-5, while the dimensions of the general, not to mention those of the elephant, must have resulted in at least a dislocation and possibly a fracture. Thereafter his mobility was greatly restricted, and it was surely this accident that brought his career to an abrupt end. He resigned as Director General in 1885 – so almost immediately — and by 1886 was back in London. There, in 1887, he was knighted but not publicly lionised. The critics were already at work; and by a cruel quirk of fate all his papers and drawings, plus a considerable collection of coins, sculptures and other curiosities, had been lost in transit when the ship carrying them sank off the coast of Sri Lanka. He continued to write, mostly scholarly monographs on coins, and though now almost immobile, lived for another seven years, dying in 1893.







Dr. James Burgess, Cunningham's short-lived successor as Director General of the ASI, devoted his career to the antiquities of western and southern India.



# IV

## Cunningham to Curzon

Oddly, one of Cunningham's last discoveries in India was that the ASI itself was ripe for excavation. He recommended a wholesale delegation of its responsibilities, a reduction in its size and the abolition of his post of Director General. This was not an admission of personal failure, although it did reflect the ASI's inability to oversee activities beyond Upper India (that is the North and adjacent parts of Central India). The task in hand was simply too much for what was still essentially a one-man institution. In a patchwork empire with strong regional traditions of government, within a subcontinent possessed of what Curzon would call 'the greatest galaxy of monuments in the world', and at a time of few railways and almost no telephones, directing the operations of any India-wide institution was fraught with complications. The ASI's authority had never counted for much in the peninsular South (essentially the princely states of Hyderabad, Mysore and Travancore plus directly-ruled Madras) nor in most of western India (the Bombay presidency/province including what are now Maharashtra, Gujerat and Pakistan's Sind province). In that sense the adoption



of Cunningham's recommendation would be simply a recognition of the facts. Additionally he had become increasingly aware of the need for conservation, a matter not included in the ASI's original brief and that, necessitating on-the-spot supervision, might be better served by decentralisation.

The ASI's 'Upper India' was accordingly divided into three 'archaeological circles'. Beglar was appointed surveyor for Bengal (including Assam and what is now Jharkhand), J B Keith assumed responsibility for what is now UP and northern Bihar (where he was assisted by the decidedly controversial Dr Anton Führer), and C J Rodgers took over the Punjab and Sind.

As for the rest of India, Dr James Burgess had in 1881 amalgamated his activities as surveyor-general of Western India, a post he had held since 1874, with those as surveyor-general of the South. Then in 1885 his status as Cunningham's chosen successor was recognised and in 1886 officially confirmed with his appointment as the second director-general of the whole ASI. The post was thus retained, albeit with few ancillary staff and a reduction in both its salary and its functions. 'The transition from the Cunningham era (1871-85) to the brief Burgess era (1885-9) also marked a shift in the priorities of the Archaeological Survey – from extensive field surveys to detailed architectural studies.'<sup>38</sup> This accorded with Burgess's background as an architectural specialist and the principal of the





Bombay College of Art. But it also signalled a redefinition of what constituted Indian archaeology in the post-Cunningham era.

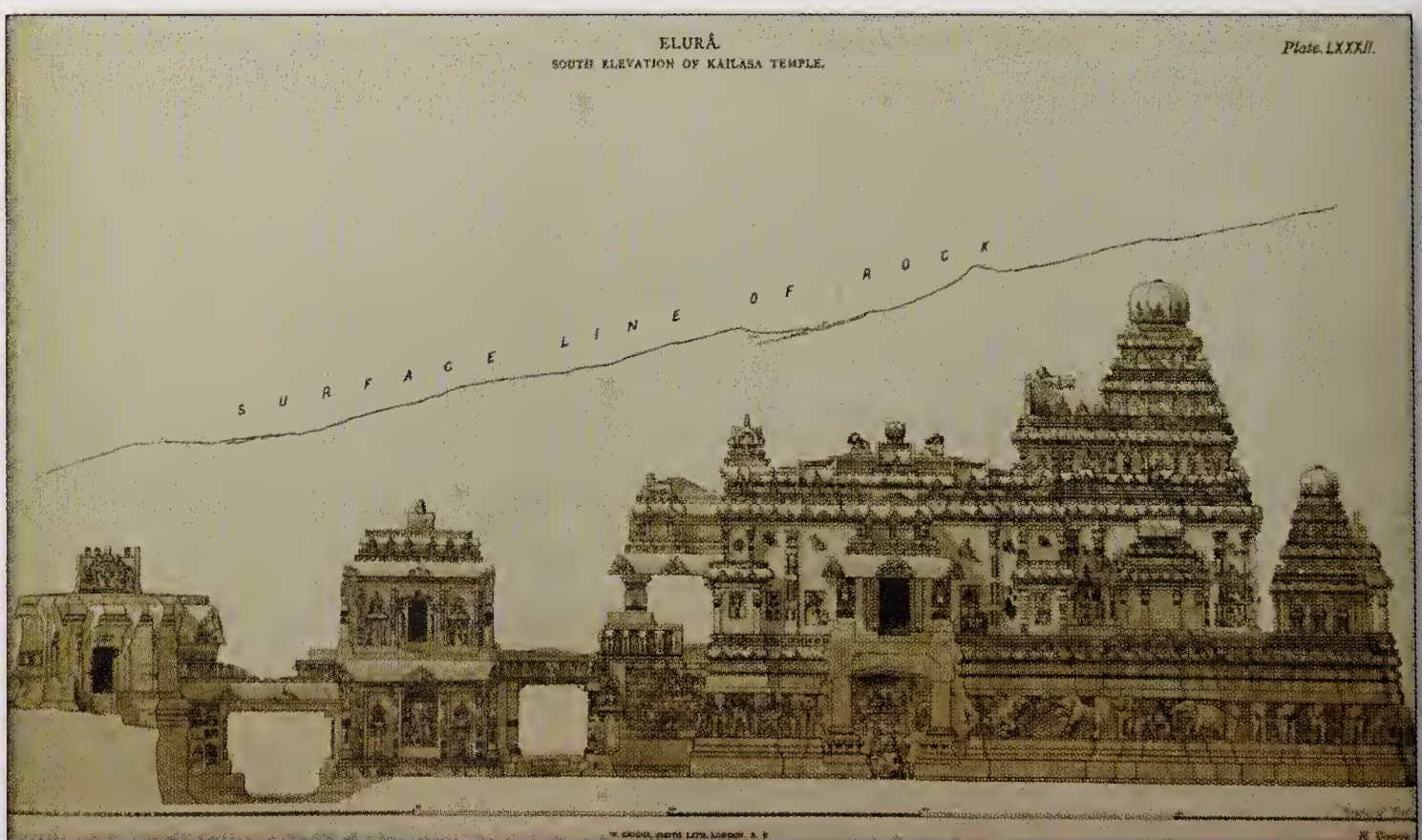
Cunningham's abilities as a linguist and epigraphist had equipped him to study archaeological sites for what they might reveal of India's history; and in the search for inscriptions and other tell-tale data (coins, seals, copper plates recording land titles) his background as an engineer had encouraged him to excavate. Though he had little understanding of stratigraphy or the finer arts of archaeological excavation, he appreciated that ground levels rose with the passage of time (he suggested as much as 18 inches per century) and that uncovering antiquity meant digging. Burgess and his contemporaries seldom dug. They were wary of accusations about damaging sites and less interested in them as historical evidence. Rather were

Burgess's assistant in the South, Alexander Rea, surveyed sites in Tamil Nadu, including the Minakashi Temple in Madurai and this nearby *choultry* (hall) of Tirumala Nayak.



they excited by their aesthetic merits, by what could be learned of their stylistic development, and by representing these qualities in as attractive a format as possible. Like Cunningham, Burgess was a prolific writer; but while Cunningham's reports had been annual, wordy, sparsely illustrated and of manageable size, Burgess's tended to be erratic, thematic, lavishly illustrated and of table-top dimensions. In the 1870s he published accounts of the antiquities of Belgaum (Karnataka), Cutch and Kathiawad (Gujarat), then of Bidar, Aurangabad and Ajanta (all in Maharashtra); in the 1880s, having added the South to his portfolio, he reported on Amaravati (Andhra Pradesh), Ellora and the Maharashtran cave temples. Meanwhile Alexander Rea, his assistant in the South, surveyed Mamallapuram, Kanchipuram and Madurai (Tamil Nadu), followed by the great ruined city of Hampi/Vijayanagar (Karnataka).

'Surely the world's largest piece of sculpture,' the 8th century Kailasa Temple at Ellora (Maharashtra), while exhibiting structural features, is in fact a monolith cut intaglio from solid rock.





Visually these lavishly produced reports had a considerable impact. Magnificent engravings and photographs of the Amaravati stupa reliefs, of the colossal rock-cut Kailasa temple at Ellora (surely the world's largest piece of sculpture) and of the acres of abandoned city at Hampi fired the popular imagination. But they also burdened the official conscience with concerns for their ongoing conservation. Signs of neglect and vandalism were noted everywhere. And according to Captain Henry Hardy Cole, it was the government itself that was largely reponsible.

This Captain Cole was the same as he who, during Cunningham's absence from India in the late 1860s, had prepared plaster casts of the Sanchi railings for despatch to London and elsewhere. As the son of Sir Henry Cole (an arts impresario whose claims to fame included the invention of the Christmas card, the design of the first postage stamp and the organisation of both London's Great Exhibition of 1851 and what is now the Victoria and Albert Museum), Captain Cole had strong ideas on design plus an eye for the authentic and the picturesque. Returning to India around 1880 he had specialised in championing the cause of conservation, something not included in Cunningham's remit as Director General, and to that end in 1882 he had compiled a devastating report.

Cole's report focused heavily on the plight of Mughal structures, like the Red Forts of Delhi and Agra, which were still in use as military



barracks. In Delhi ‘the Rang Mahal had been re-roofed and partitioned to function as a mess-house, one of the marble pavilions in the centre of the Haiyat Baksh garden was being used to serve out meat rations while the other had been put to use as a gymnasium ... the Diwan-i-Khas had been garishly repainted in black, red and gold as part of the preparation for a ball ... [and] the Diwan-i-Am ... had been transformed into a canteen, with a liquor bar to the right of the throne and a coffee shop to its left.’<sup>39</sup>

As barracks, Agra’s Red Fort, like that in Delhi, suffered from a depredation and neglect that the ASI could do little about. On the other hand the Taj Mahal (in the background) remained comparatively unscathed.

Such a broadside aimed at military insensitivity ought to have hit its mark since Cole had just been appointed India’s first – and only – ‘Curator of Ancient Monuments’. But the post had been independent of the ASI and largely advisory; any work, whether of conservation or restoration, had been held to be the responsibility of the local authorities. Nor had






Cole's rank, now that of Major, counted for much. He had been unable to do anything either about the military men swilling their *chota pegs* in the Red Fort's marble pavilions or the unfortunate restoration work being conducted by Beglar on the Boddh Gaya temple. He had, though, compiled a list of endangered sites and drawn up an ambitious programme of conservation for them. At enormous expense he also published three monumental reports and several lesser ones.

This lavish disbursal of public funds had not endeared him to his governmental employers; and neither had a blazing row with Burgess over the Amaravati stupa. Many of the stupa's sculpted slabs had already been packed off to museums; Burgess had simply wanted to ensure the preservation of the remainder by reuniting them with those in the Madras museum. Cole, though, had been adamant that they remain *in situ*; Amaravati's plight cried out for curatorial attention, he claimed, not wholesale removal. Archaeological surveyors were meant to 'write ancient history and not go about the country pilfering tons of sculpture from well-known monuments'.<sup>40</sup> A new Treasure Trove Act had just been passed to prevent precisely such depredations.

In the end it had been Cunningham who had been called in to adjudicate and, naturally, as the champion of Bharhut's removal to the Calcutta Museum, he had supported Burgess. Cole thus lost, and in 1883 his three-year





term as Curator had not been renewed. The post lapsed. Though the battle-lines between conservation on the one hand and exploration/excavation on the other remained blurred, all physical intervention was now left to the discretion of provincial governments and to execution by their Public Works Departments (PWDs). On the basis of Cole's listing, vulnerable sites were therefore to be classified according to their supposed importance and divided into three categories: those that the provincial authorities must keep in good repair, those that they must simply keep clear of invasion by vegetation and flood, and those that they could leave to fend for themselves.

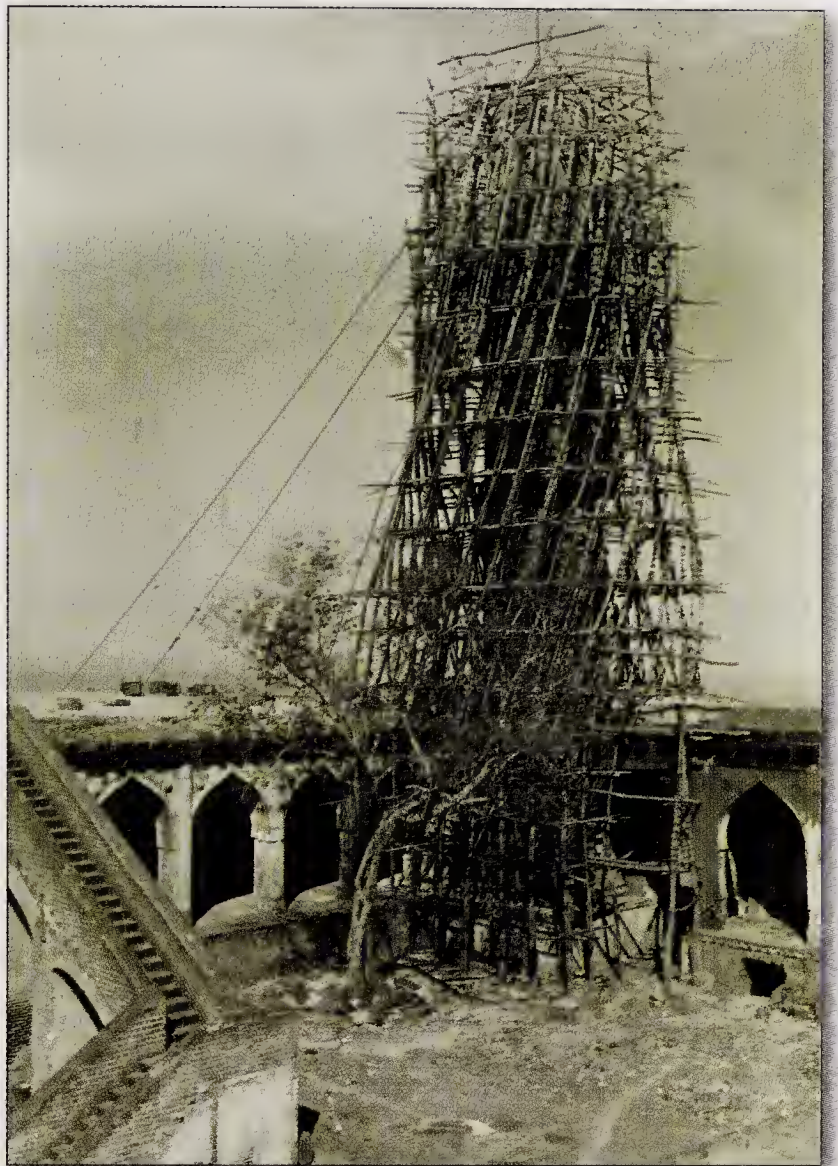
### Burgess Despairs

Inheriting these already devolved arrangements, Burgess as the ASI's new Director General found himself with all-India responsibilities which he had neither the funds, the personnel nor the freedom to exercise. 'The Director General was to act only as a post-office', taking delivery of his surveyors' conservation proposals as forwarded to him by the provincial authorities and responding to them by the same round-about bureaucratic channels.<sup>41</sup> As a result, little was achieved, and that rather slowly. In the field, a survey of Jaunpur (UP), the capital of the Muslim Sharqi dynasty in the 15th century, was completed and further surveys were conducted at Sahet Mahet (Cunningham's Sravasti), Ayodhya, Orchha (all UP) and Bijapur (Karnataka). Excavations were rarely



attempted, although the one exception, the Kankali mound at Mathura, proved unusually productive with some of the earliest Buddhist figure sculpture found in the Gangetic basin.

It was not a lot to show for three years labour – added to which most of it was not actually on show. So ambitious were Burgess's publication standards and so demanding his other responsibilities that he soon found himself twelve volumes in arrears with the ASI's so-called 'New Imperial Series' of reports (ie the post-Cunningham series). He candidly confessed that there was no chance of his meeting the government-agreed deadlines for these unless he relinquished all other work; and this he duly did. In 1889, he took premature retirement from the Director Generalship. Moreover, like Cunningham, he too recommended that the post of Director General lapse and that the ASI be slimmed down. This was in response to draconian government cut-backs and in line with his own estimate of what survey work remained to be done. Ever since Cunningham's day it had been assumed that a survey was just that, a one-off and finite inventory. Unburdened with on-going responsibilities for things like



Conservation, as here on the minar of the Asirgarh mosque (MP), only became an ASI priority towards the end of the nineteenth century when the listing and recording of monuments was supposed nearly complete.



conservation and excavation, the ASI should therefore be winding down as its work was completed. Burgess reckoned in 1889 that the North needed another five years work, the South eight and the West one. The ASI would thus be redundant by the end of the century.

‘The new policy led to the virtual disappearance of the Archaeological Survey as a central body and was a reversion to the chaos and disorganisation of the pre-Cunningham era.’<sup>42</sup> Only three surveyors for the whole of India remained in the field; and throughout the 1890s there was no central direction and very little on-site excavation. Such initiatives as were pursued stemmed from the interest of individual officials who, as Cunningham had pointed out in 1861, tended to move on before anything could be achieved.

More by default than design, one field of scholarship did prosper outside the ASI’s control. In 1883 Cunningham had secured (again by pledging part of his own salary) the appointment of J F Fleet as epigraphist to the Government of India. The accumulation of inscriptions had long since exceeded the ASI’s ability to translate and publish them, although Cunningham himself had made a start with volume one of what he called the *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* (his volume was on the Asoka inscriptions). In recognition of the South’s non-Sanskritic languages, a similar arrangement was made there with the appointment of E Hultzsch by the Madras government. In the North Dr





Führer added epigraphy to his ill-defined brief, and in Bombay Dr Burgess launched his own quarterly, *Epigraphia Indica*, using the services of several distinguished German scholars.

Encouraged by the work of the great Sanskritist Max Müller at Oxford, German (and Swiss) indologists were posing the sort of challenge earlier offered by French orientalists. As museum curators, epigraphists and language scholars, Führer in the North, Hultsch in the South, Georg Bühler in Bombay and Rudolf Hoernle in Varanasi and Calcutta were more detached from the administration than Cunningham or Burgess and could afford to be more critical. Hoernle bemoaned the neglect of excavation, 'the essential part of any properly conducted archaeological survey', and noted the failure to explore - or even confirm the identity of - three of the most important Buddhist sites.<sup>43</sup> Bühler echoed these sentiments and greatly extended the list of sites whose careful excavation using the latest techniques (he was probably thinking of Schliemann in Crete and Layard in Mesopotamia) would surely fill in vast gaps in India's history.

Yet the government of the day was unimpressed; an 1895 reorganisation reverted to the idea of 'archaeological circles' and emphasised the need for more conservation work, while failing to provide what was left of the ASI with any direction and leaving the responsibility for conservation work with the local administrations and their PWDs. However,





international disgust at Britain's neglect of India's heritage did embarrass one keen British observer.

*Were Germany the ruling power in India, I do not hesitate to say that she would be spending many lakhs a year on a task to which we have hitherto rather plumed ourselves on our generosity in devoting Rs 61,000 ... When I reflect upon the sums of money that are gaily dispensed on the construction of impossible forts in impossible places, which are to sustain an impossible siege against an impossible foe, I do venture to hope that so mean a standard may not again be pleaded...*

The words, like the rotund phrasing, were typical of British India's most distinguished ruler. In 1899 that 'most superior person', George Nathaniel Curzon, arrived as viceroy.

### Cometh the Hour...

Baron Curzon of Kedleston, as he then was, would alienate many, both Indians and British; but his dedication to the cause of Indian archaeology can hardly be faulted. An outstanding scholar, traveller and statesman, he towered over his contemporaries and cared not if they resented it. His passion for all things oriental was genuine, his ability to get things done undisputed. The ASI had acquired a champion.

'I cannot conceive any obligation more strictly pertaining to a Supreme Government than the conservation of the most beautiful and perfect





‘The greatest galaxy of monuments in the world’ was how Lord Curzon described India’s built heritage. Arriving as viceroy in 1899, he effectively relaunched the ASI on a professional basis.



collection of monuments in the world,' he announced in 1900. India was another Egypt, another Greece, yet what did he find there? Five 'circles' whose geographical arrangement was 'fantastic'; surveyors devoid of scholarship or science who were just that – surveyors; a 'most whimsical difference ... between the policy adopted in different provinces'; an 'absence of any central and duly qualified advising authority'; and "neither principle nor unity in conservation or repair".<sup>44</sup> As a result, buildings were falling down, sites being despoiled and scholarship neglected. Something must be done.

But it was not that easy. Curzon was two years into his term of office before the Secretary of State approved a new directive. This allowed for some basic reorganisation and an increased budget. But the arrangements were for a trial period of just five years; the budget was not exactly generous; and worst of all, conservation work continued to be the responsibility of the provincial administrations. On the other hand the 'circles' had been rejigged and archaeological surveyors, sometimes with assistants, allotted to all of them. Crucially, the principle of a central directorate had also been approved. A new Director General was on his way. He would enjoy more enthusiastic viceregal support than any of his predecessors; and given the backgrounds of both men, it could be assumed that the priority to be given to conservation would not preclude the more exciting possibilities of excavation. In a speech to the Asiatic Society of Bengal, that forum of



Prinsep and clearing-house of Cunningham, Curzon laid claim to the whole spectrum of antiquarian research as understood by the Society's founder, Sir William Jones. *'It is, in my judgement, equally our duty to dig and discover, to classify, reproduce and describe, to copy and decipher, and to cherish and conserve.'*

John Marshall, the ASI's third Director General, arrived in 1902. The contrast with Cunningham and Burgess could hardly have been more striking. A clean-shaven 26-year old fresh from the excavations in Crete, Marshall had been recommended by the British Museum as someone whose scholarly and administrative skills were matched by the more scientific approach expected of a twentieth-century archaeologist. Under the new regime, prehistory and pottery were at last to take their place in India's antiquarian lexicon; brush and trowel would join mattock and pick as the basic tools of the trade. Most important of all, urgent efforts were afoot to train Indians in the new science. The absurdity of crediting learned Indian scholars as little more than local informants had already been accepted. So too had the desirability of employing Muslims and Hindus to facilitate access to those sites that were still in use for devotional purposes.



As Director General of the revived ASI, Curzon appointed the 26-year old John Marshall. At Taxila, Harappa and a host of other sites Marshall introduced the latest techniques in excavation and would hold the post from 1902-28.





Rai Bahadur Daya Ram Sahni was the first Indian Director General of the ASI (1931-5). A longer tenure was that of Rao Bahadur K N Dikshit (1937-44).

But it was only now that the travesty of entrusting India's archeological heritage to almost anyone but Indians was exposed. Among those recruited under the new policy was Daya Ram Sahni. In 1920, Sahni would begin operations at Harappa and in 1931 he would succeed Marshall as the ASI's first Indian Director General.

Curzon's work climaxed In 1904 with a comprehensive Ancient Monuments Preservation Act. This afforded blanket protection

to all sites, including those in private ownership, made their conservation mandatory and tightened the regulations against the traffic in antiquities. It was matched by Marshall's 1903 definition of what conservation actually meant. Hypothetical restoration was admissible only if a structure was in imminent danger of collapse; original components should always be retained intact; decorative restoration should depend on the availability of craftsmen no less skilled than those who had originally done the work; and depictions in stone, however worn, should never be re-carved.

By the time Curzon left in 1906, the higher profile and greater resources merited by the world's finest assemblage of monuments was no longer in doubt. The Mughal pavilions in



Delhi, Agra and Lahore were being stripped of their military accretions; the first great discoveries of the revamped ASI would soon follow. North of the Himalayas the ASI's Aurel Stein was about to pursue Xuanzang's trail back to China and add a whole new geographical dimension to ancient India's cultural heritage. And at Taxila, then Harappa, Marshall would push back its chronology to an undreamed of antiquity. The 'illusory belief', as Marshall had called it, that an archaeological survey might ever be deemed complete had finally been abandoned. As of April 1906 the ASI was accorded the permanent status that it has enjoyed ever since.





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## I - THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE SURVEY

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The image of the Eastern Gate of the Bharut Stupa is taken from  
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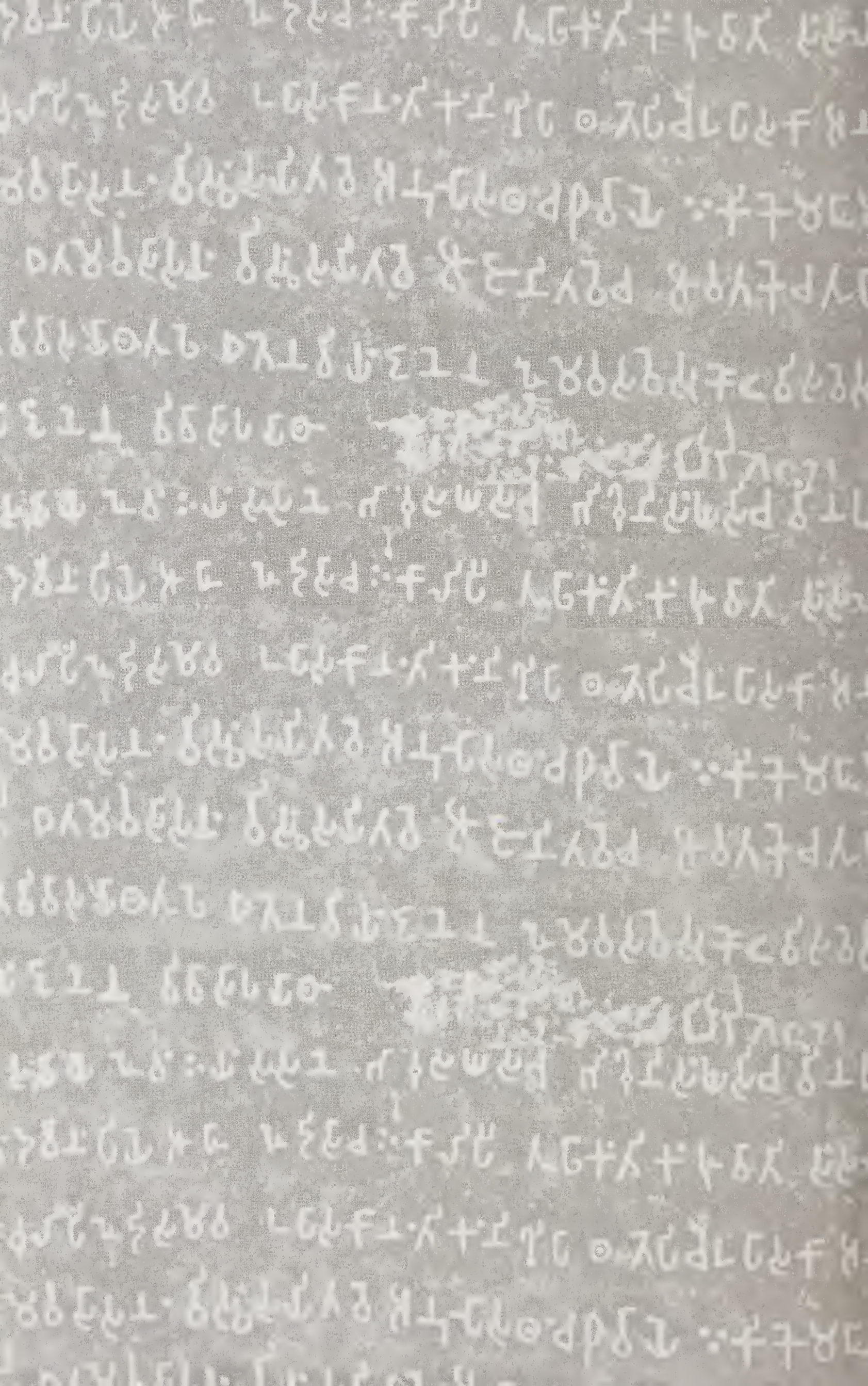
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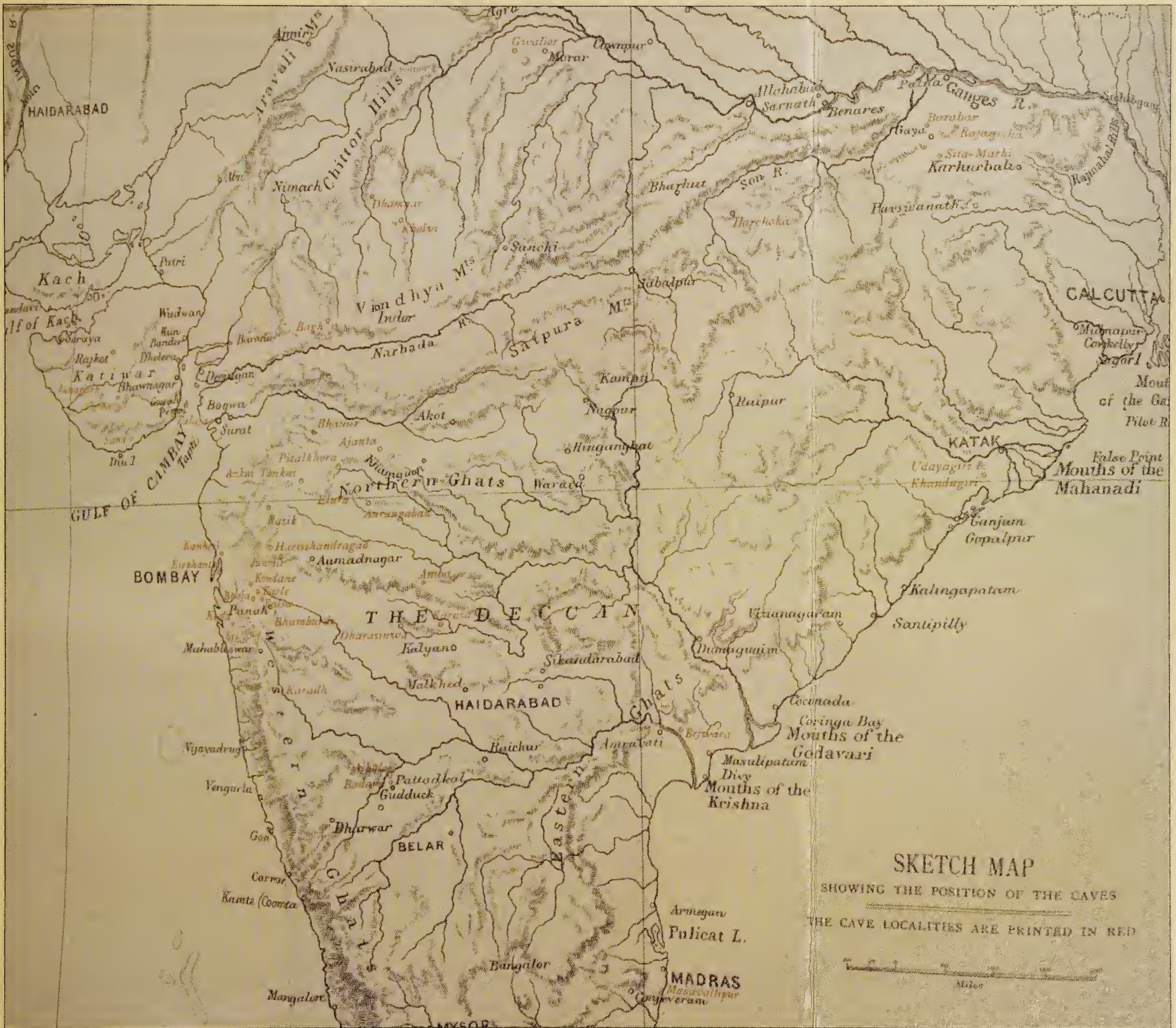
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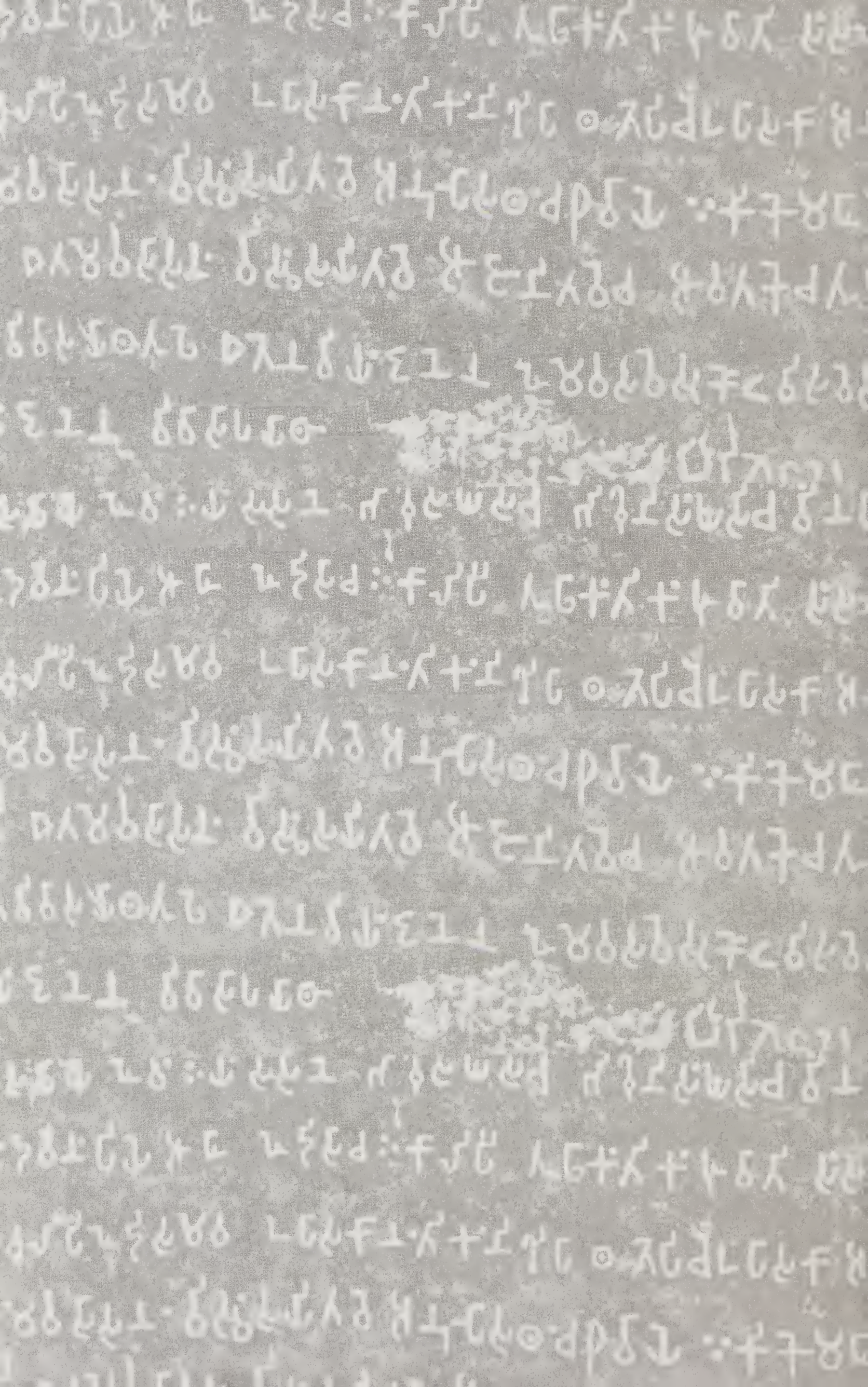




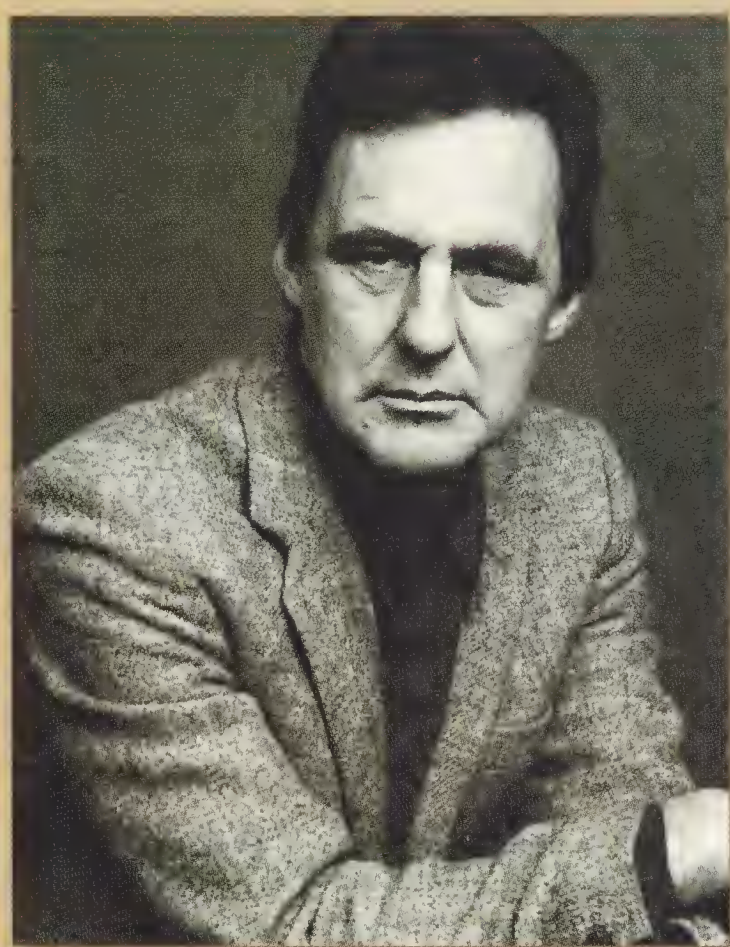
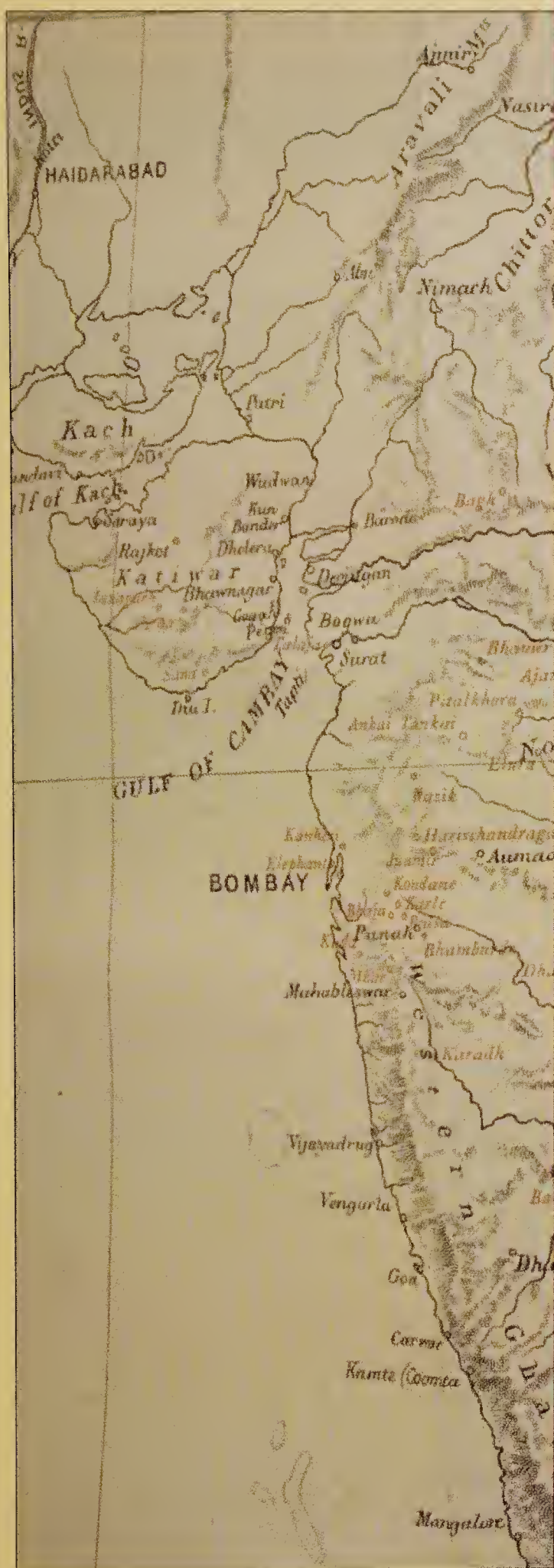


Disclaimer: The map of India printed here is a historic map and may not be accurate.









## About the author

John Keay has been writing about India for forty years. His *India Discovered* (1981) inspired a revival of interest in nineteenth-century scholarship and archaeology, and his best-selling *India: A History* (2000) is the standard narrative account of the subcontinent's 5000-year past.



*“It is, in my opinion, equally our duty to dig and  
discover, to classify and reproduce and  
describe, to copy and decipher and to  
cherish and conserve.”*

*Lord Curzon  
Address to the Asiatic Society of Bengal  
February 1900*



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